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THE WIZARD'S SON.

VOL. I.

THE WIZARD'S SON

A Novel

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF "THE CURATE IN CHARGE," "YOUNG MUSGRAVE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

London

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1884

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THE WIZARD'S SON.

CHAPTER I.

The Methvens occupied a little house in the outskirts of a little town where there was not very much going on of any description, and still less which they could take any share in, being, as they were, poor and unable to make any effective response to the civilities shown to them. The family consisted of three persons —the mother, who was a widow with one son; the son himself, who was a young man of three or four and twenty; and a distant cousin of Mrs. Methven's, who lived with her, having no other home. It was not a very happy household. The mother had a limited income and an anxious temper; the son a somewhat volatile and indolent disposition, and no ambition at all as to his future, nor anxiety as to what was going to happen to him in life. This, as may be supposed, was enough to introduce many uneasy elements into their joint existence; and the third of the party, Miss

Merivale, was not of the class of the peacemakers to whom Scripture allots a special blessing. She had no amiable glamour in her eyes, but saw her friends' imperfections with a clearness of sight which is little conducive to that happy progress of affairs which is called "getting on." The Methvens were sufficiently proud to keep their difficulties out of the public eye, but on very many occasions, unfortunately, it had become very plain to themselves that they did not "get on." It was not any want of love. Mrs. Methven was herself aware, and her friends were in the constant habit of saying, that she had sacrificed everything for Walter. Injudicious friends are fond of making such statements, by way, it is to be supposed, of increasing the devotion and gratitude of the child to the parent: but the result is, unfortunately, very often the exact contrary of what is desired—for no one likes to have his duty in this respect pointed out to him, and whatever good people may think, it is not in itself an agreeable thought that "sacrifices" have been made for one, and an obligation placed upon one's shoulders from the beginning of time, independent of any wish or claim upon the part of the person served. The makers of sacrifices have seldom the reward which surrounding spectators, and in many cases themselves, think their due. Mrs. Methven herself would probably have been at a loss to name what were the special sacrifices she had made for Walter. She had remained a widow, but that she would have been eager to add was no sacrifice.

She had pinched herself more or less to find the means for his education, which had been of what is supposed in England to be the best kind: and she had, while he was a boy, subordinated her own tastes and pleasures to his, and eagerly sought out everything that was likely to be agreeable to him. When they took their yearly money—as it is considered necessary for him—places that Walter liked, or where he could find amusement, or had friends, were eagerly sought for. "Women," Mrs. Methven said, "can make themselves comfortable anywhere; but a boy, you know, is quite different." "Quite," Miss Merivale would say: "Oh, if you only knew them as well as we do; they are creatures entirely without resources. You must put their toys into their very hands." "There is no question of toys with Walter—he has plenty of resources. It is not that," Mrs. Methven would explain, growing red. "I hope I am not one of the silly mothers that thrust their children upon everybody: but, of course, a boy must be considered. Everybody who has had to do with men—or boys—knows that they must be considered." A woman whose life has been mixed up with these troublesome beings feels the superiority of her experience to those who know nothing about them. And in this way, without spoiling him or treating him with ridiculous devotion, as the king of her fate, Walter had been "considered" all his life.

For the rest, Mrs. Methven had, it must be allowed, lived a much more agreeable life in the little society of

Sloebury when her son was young than she did now that he had come to years, mis-named, of discretion. Then she had given her little tea-parties, or even a small occasional dinner, at which her handsome boy would make his appearance when it was holiday time, interesting everybody; or, when absent, would still furnish a very pleasant subject of talk to the neighbours, who thought his mother did a great deal too much for him, but still were pleased to discuss a boy who was having the best of educations, and at a public school. In those days she felt herself very comfortable in Sloebury, and was asked to all the best houses, and felt a modest pride in the certainty that she was able to offer something in return. But matters were very different when Walter was four-and-twenty instead of fourteen. By that time it was apparent that he was not going to take the world by storm, or set the Thames on fire; and, though she had been too sensible to brag, Mrs. Methven had thought both these things possible, and perhaps had allowed it to be perceived that she considered something great, something out of the way, to be Walter's certain career. But twenty-four is, as she said herself, so different! He had been unsuccessful in some of his examinations, and for others he had not been "properly prepared." His mother did not take refuge in the thought that the examiners were partial or the trials unfair; but there was naturally always a word as to the reason why he did not succeed —he had not been "properly prepared." He knew of

one only a few days before the eventful moment, and at this time of day, she asked indignantly, when everything is got by competition, how is a young man who has not "crammed" to get the better of one who has? The fact remained that at twenty-four, Walter, evidently a clever fellow, with a great many endowments, had got nothing to do; and, what was worse—a thing which his mother, indeed, pretended to be unconscious of, but which everybody else in the town remarked upon—he was not in the least concerned about this fact, but took his doing nothing quite calmly as the course of nature, and neither suffered from it, nor made any effort to place himself in a different position. He "went in for" an examination when it was put before him as a thing to do, and took his failure more than philosophically when he failed, as, as yet, he had always done: and, in the mean time, contentedly lived on, without disturbing himself, and tranquilly let the time go by—the golden time which should have shaped his life.

This is not a state of affairs which can bring happiness to any household. There is a kind of parent—or rather it should be said of a mother, for no parent of the other sex is supposed capable of so much folly—to whom everything is good that her child, the cherished object of her affections, does; and this is a most happy regulation of nature, and smoothes away the greatest difficulties of life for many simple-hearted folk, without doing half so much harm as is attributed to it; for

disapproval has little moral effect, and lessens the happiness of all parties, without materially lessening the sins of the erring. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Methven was not of this happy kind. She saw her son's faults almost too clearly, and they gave her the most poignant pain. She was a proud woman, and that he should suffer in the opinion of the world was misery and grief to her. She was stung to the heart by disappointment in the failure of her many hopes and projects for him. She was stricken with shame to think of all the fine things that had been predicted of Walter in his boyish days, and that not one of them had come true. People had ceased now to speak of the great things that Walter would do. They asked "*What* was he going to do?" in an entirely altered tone, and this went to her heart. Her pride suffered the most terrible blow. She could not bear the thought; and though she maintained a calm face to the world, and represented herself as entirely satisfied, Walter knew otherwise, and had gradually replaced his old careless affection for his mother by an embittered opposition and resistance to her, which made both their lives wretched enough. How it was that he did not make an effort to escape from her continual remonstrances, her appeals and entreaties, her censure and criticism, it is very difficult to tell. To have gone away, and torn her heart with anxiety, but emancipated himself from a yoke which it was against the dignity of his manhood to bear, would have been much more natural. But he

had no money, and he had not the energy to seize upon any way of providing for himself. Had such an opportunity fallen at his feet he would probably have accepted it with fervour; but Fortune did not put herself out of the way to provide for him, nor he to be provided for. Notwithstanding the many scenes which took place in the seclusion of that poor little house, when the mother, what with love, shame, mortification, and impatience, would all but rave in impotent passion, appealing to him, to the pride, the ambition, the principle which so far as could be seen the young man did not possess, Walter held upon his way with an obstinate pertinacity, and did nothing. How he managed to do this without losing all self-respect and every better feeling it is impossible to say; but he did so somehow, and was still "a nice enough fellow," notwithstanding that everybody condemned him; and had not even lost the good opinion of the little society, though it was unanimous in blame. The only way in which he responded to his mother's remonstrances and complaints was by seeking his pleasure and such occupation as contented him—which was a little cricket now and then, a little lawn-tennis, a little flirtation—as far away from her as possible; and by being as little at home as possible. His temper was a little spoilt by the scenes which awaited him when he went home; and these seemed to justify to himself his gradual separation from his mother's house: but never induced him to sacrifice, or even modify, his own course. He appeared to think

that he had a justification for his conduct in the opposition it met with; and that his pride was involved in the necessity for never giving in. If he had been let alone, he represented to himself, everything would have been different; but to yield to this perpetual bullying was against every instinct. And even the society which disapproved so much gave a certain encouragement to Walter in this point of view: for it was Mrs. Methven whom everybody blamed. It was her ridiculous pride, or her foolish indulgence, or her sinful backing-up of his natural indolence; even some people thought it was her want of comprehension of her son which had done it, and that Walter would have been entirely a different person in different hands. If she had not thought it a fine thing to have him appear as a useless fine gentleman above all necessity of working for his living, it was incredible that he could have allowed the years to steal by without making any exertion. This was what the town decided, not without a good deal of sympathy for Walter. What could be expected? Under the guidance of a foolish mother, a young man always went wrong; and in this case he did not go wrong, poor fellow! he only wasted his existence, nothing worse. Sloebury had much consideration for the young man.

Perhaps it added something to the exasperation with which Mrs. Methven saw all her efforts fail that she had some perception of this, and knew that it was supposed to be her fault. No doubt in her soul it added to the impatience and indignation and pain with

which she contemplated the course of affairs, which she was without strength to combat, yet could not let alone. Now and then, indeed, she did control herself so far as to let them alone, and then there was nothing but tranquillity and peace in the house. But she was a conscientious woman, and, poor soul! she had a temper—the very complacency and calm with which her son went upon his way, the approval he showed of her better conduct when she left him to his own devices, struck her in some moments with such sudden indignation and pain, that she could no longer contain herself. He, who might have been anything he pleased, to be nothing! He, of whom everybody had predicted such great things! At such moments the sight of Walter smiling, strolling along with his hands in his pockets, excited her almost to frenzy. Poor lady! So many women would have been proud of him—a handsome young fellow in flannels, with his cricket bat or his racquet when occasion served. But love and injured pride were bitter in her heart, and she could not bear the sight. All this while, however, nobody knew anything about the scenes that arose in the little house, which preserved a show of happiness and tender union long after the reality was gone. Indeed, even Miss Merivale, who had unbounded opportunities of knowing, took a long time to make up her mind that Walter and his mother did not "get on."

Such was the unfortunate state of affairs at the time when this history begins. The Methvens were distantly

connected, it was known, with a great family in Scotland, which took no notice whatever of them, and, indeed, had very little reason so to do, Captain Methven being long since dead, and his widow and child entirely unknown to the noble house, from which it was so great an honour to derive a little, much-diluted, far-off drop of blood, more blue and more rich than the common. It is possible that had the connection been by Mrs. Methven's side she would have known more about it, and taken more trouble to keep up her knowledge of the family. But it was not so, and she had even in her younger days been conscious of little slights and neglects which had made her rather hostile than otherwise to the great people from whom her husband came. "I know nothing about the Erradeens," she would say; "they are much too grand to take any notice of us: and I am too proud to seek any notice from them."

"I am afraid, my dear, there is a good deal in that," said old Mrs. Wynn, the wife of the old rector, shaking her white head. This lady was a sort of benign embodiment of justice in Sloebury. She punished nobody, but she saw the right and wrong with a glance that was almost infallible, and shook her head though she never exacted any penalty.

Here Miss Merivale would seize the occasion to strike in—

"Prejudice is prejudice," she said, "whatever form it takes. A lord has just as much chance of being nice as an—apothecary." This was said because the young

doctor, newly admitted into his father's business, who thought no little of himself, was within reach, and just then caught Miss Merivale's eye.

"That is a very safe speech, seeing there are neither lords nor apothecaries here," he said with the blandest smile. He was not a man to be beaten at such a game.

"But a lord may have influence, you know. For Walter's sake I would not lose sight of him," said Mrs. Wynn.

"You cannot lose sight of what you have never seen: besides, influence is of no consequence nowadays. Nobody can do anything for you—save yourself," said Mrs. Methven with a little sigh. Her eyes turned involuntarily to where Walter was. He was always in the middle of everything that was going on. Among the Sloebury young people he had a little air of distinction, or so at least his mother thought. She was painfully impartial, and generally, in her anxiety, perceived his bad points rather than his good ones; but as she glanced at the group, love for once allowed itself to speak, though always with an accent peculiar to the character of the thinker. She allowed to herself that he had an air of distinction, a something more than the others—alas, that nothing ever came of it! The others all, or almost all, were already launched in the world. They were doing or trying to do something—whereas Walter! But she took care that nobody should hear that irrepressible sigh.

"I am very sorry for it," said Mrs. Wynn, "for there

are many people who would never push for themselves, and yet do very well indeed when they are put in the way."

"I am all for the pushing people," said Miss Merivale. "I like the new state of affairs. When every one stands for himself, and you get just as much as you work for, there will be no grudges and sulkings with society. Though I'm a Tory, I like every man to make his own way."

"A lady's politics are never to be calculated upon," said the Rector, who was standing up against the fire on his own hearth, rubbing his old white hands. "It is altogether against the principles of Toryism, my dear lady, that a man should make his own way. It is sheer democracy. As for that method of examinations, it is one of the most levelling principles of the time—it is one of Mr. Gladstone's instruments for the destruction of society. When the son of a cobbler is just as likely to come to high command as your son or mine, what is to become of the country?" the old clergyman said, lifting those thin white hands.

Mr. Gladstone's name was as a firebrand thrown into the midst of this peaceable little country community. The speakers all took fire. They thought that there was no doubt about what was going to come of the country. It was going to destruction as fast as fate could carry it. When society had dropped to pieces, and the rabble had come uppermost, and England had become a mere name, upon which all foreign nations

should trample, and wild Irishmen dance war dances, and Americans expectorate, then Mr. Gladstone would be seen in his true colours. While this was going on, old Mrs. Wynn sat in her easy-chair and shook her head. She declared always that she was no politician. And young Walter Methven, attracted by the sudden quickening of the conversation which naturally attended the introduction of this subject, came forward, ready in the vein of opposition which was always his favourite attitude.

"Mr. Gladstone must be a very great man," he said. "I hear it is a sign of being in society when you foam at the mouth at the sound of his name."

"You young fellows think it fine to be on the popular side; but wait till you are my age," cried one of the eager speakers. "It will not matter much to me. There will be peace in my days." "But wait," cried another, "and see how you will like it when everything topples down together, the crown and the state, and the aristocracy, and public credit, and national honour, and property, and the constitution, and——"

So many anxious and alarmed politicians here spoke together that the general voice became inarticulate, and Walter Methven, representing the opposition, was at liberty to laugh.

"Come one, come all!" he cried, backed up by the arm of the sofa, upon which Mrs. Wynn sat shaking her head. "It would be a fine thing for me and all the other proletarians. Something would surely fall our way."

His mother watched him, standing up against the sofa, confronting them all, with her usual exasperated and angry affection. She thought, as she looked at him, that there was nothing he was not fit for. He was clever enough for Parliament; he might have been prime minister—but he was nothing! nothing, and likely to be nothing, doing nothing, desiring nothing. Her eye fell on young Wynn, the rector's nephew, who had just got a fellowship at his college, and on the doctor's son, who was just entering into a share of his father's practice, and on Mr. Jeremy the young banker, whose attentions fluttered any maiden to whom he might address them. They were Walter's contemporaries, and not one of them was worthy, she thought, to be seen by the side of her boy; but they had all got before him in the race of life. They were something and he was nothing. It was not much wonder if her heart was sore and angry. When she turned round to listen civilly to something that was said to her, her face was contracted and pale. It was more than she could bear. She made a move to go away before any of the party was ready, and disturbed Miss Merivale in the midst of a *tête-à-tête*, which was a thing not easily forgiven.

Walter walked home with them in great good humour, but his mother knew very well that he was not coming in. He was going to finish the evening elsewhere. If he had come in would she have been able to restrain herself? Would she not have fallen

upon him, either in anger or in grief, holding up to him the examples of young Wynn and young Jeremy and the little doctor? She knew she would not have been able to refrain, and it was almost a relief to her, though it was another pang, when he turned away at the door.

"I want to speak to Underwood about to-morrow?" he said.

"What is there about to-morrow? Of all the people in Sloebury Captain Underwood is the one I like least," she said. "Why must you always have something to say to him when every one else is going to bed?"

"I am not going to bed, nor is he," said Walter lightly.

Mrs. Methven's nerves were highly strung. Miss Merivale had passed in before them, and there was nobody to witness this little struggle, which she knew would end in nothing, but which was inevitable. She grasped him by the arm in her eagerness and pain.

"Oh, my boy!" she said, "come in, come in, and think of something more than the amusement of to-morrow. Life is not all play, though you seem to think so. For once listen to me, Walter—oh, listen to me! You cannot go on like this. Think of all the others; all at work, every one of them, and you doing nothing."

"Do you want me to begin to do something now," said Walter, "when you have just told me everybody was going to bed?"

"Oh! if I were you," she cried in her excitement, "I would rest neither night nor day. I would not let it be said that I was the last, and every one of them before me."

Walter shook himself free of her detaining hold. "Am I to be a dustman, or a scavenger, or—what?" he said, contemptuously. "I know no other trades that are followed at this hour."

Mrs. Methven had reached the point at which a woman has much ado not to cry in the sense of impotence and exasperation which such an argument brings. "It is better to do anything than to do nothing," she cried, turning away from him and hastening in at the open door.

He paused a moment, as if doubtful what to do; there was something in her hasty withdrawal which for an instant disposed him to follow, and she paused breathless, with a kind of hope, in the half-light of the little hall; but the next moment his footsteps sounded clear and quick on the pavement, going away. Mrs. Methven waited until they were almost out of hearing before she closed the door. Angry, baffled, helpless, what could she do? She wiped a hot tear from the corner of her eye before she went into the drawing-room, where her companion, always on the alert, had already turned up the light of the lamp, throwing an undesired illumination upon her face, flushed and troubled from this brief controversy.

"I thought you were never coming in," said Miss

Merivale, "and that open door sends a draught all through the house."

"Walter detained me for a moment to explain some arrangements he has to make for to-morrow," Mrs. Methven said with dignity. "He likes to keep me *au courant* of his proceedings."

Miss Merivale was absolutely silenced by this sublime assumption, notwithstanding the flush of resentment, the glimmer of moisture in the mother's eye.

CHAPTER II.

WALTER walked along the quiet, almost deserted street with a hasty step and a still hastier rush of disagreeable thoughts. There was, he felt, an advantage in being angry, in the sensation of indignant resistance to a petty tyranny. For a long time past he had taken refuge in this from every touch of conscience and sense of time lost and opportunities neglected. He was no genius, but he was not so dull as not to know that his life was an entirely unsatisfactory one, and himself in the wrong altogether; everything rotten in the state of his existence, and a great deal that must be set right one time or another in all his habits and ways. The misfortune was that it was so much easier to put off this process till to-morrow than to begin it to-day. He had never been roused out of the boyish condition of mind in which a certain resistance to authority was natural, and opposition to maternal rule and law a sort of proof of superiority and independence. Had this been put into words, and placed before him as the motive of much that he did, no one would have

coloured more angrily or resented more hotly the suggestion; and yet in the bottom of his heart he would have known it to be true. All through his unoccupied days he carried with him the sense of folly, the consciousness that he could not justify to himself the course he was pursuing. The daily necessity of justifying it to another was almost the sole thing that silenced his conscience. His mother, who kept "nagging" day after day, who was never satisfied, whose appeals he sometimes thought theatrical, and her passion got up, was his sole defence against that self-dissatisfaction which is the severest of all criticisms. If she would but let him alone, leave him to his own initiative, and not perpetually endeavour to force a change which to be effectual, as all authorities agreed, must come of itself! He was quite conscious of the inadequacy of this argument, and in his heart felt that it was a poor thing to take advantage of it; but yet, on the surface of his mind, put it forward and made a bulwark of it against his own conscience. He did so now as he hurried along, in all the heat that follows a personal encounter. If she would but let him alone! But he could not move a step anywhere, could not make an engagement, could not step into a friend's rooms, as he was going to do now, without her interference. The relations of a parent to an only child are not the same as those that exist between a father and mother and the different members of a large family.

It has been usual to consider them in one particular light as implying the closest union and mutual devotion. But there is another point of view in which to consider the question. They are so near to each other, and the relationship so close, that there is a possibility of opposition and contrariety more trying, more absorbing, than any other except that between husband and wife. A young son does not always see the necessity of devotion to a mother who is not very old, who has still many sources of pleasure apart from himself, and who is not capable, perhaps, on her side, of the undiscriminating worship which is grandmotherly, and implies a certain weakness and dimness of perception in the fond eyes that see everything in a rosy, ideal light. This fond delusion is often in its way a moral agent, obliging the object of it to fulfil what is expected of him, and reward the full and perfect trust which is given so unhesitatingly. But in this case it was not possible. The young man thought, or persuaded himself, that his mother's vexatious watch over him, and what he called her constant suspicion and doubt of him, had given him a reason for the disgust and impatience with which he turned from her control. He pictured to himself the difference which a father's larger, more generous sway would have made in him; to that he would have answered, he thought, like a ship to its helm, like an army to its general. But this petty rule, this perpetual fault-finding, raised up every faculty in

opposition. Even when he meant the best, her words of warning, her reminders of duty, were enough to set him all wrong again. He thought, as a bad husband often thinks when he is conscious of the world's disapproval, that it was her complaints that were the cause. And when he was reminded by others, well-meaning but injudicious, of all he owed to his mother, his mind rose yet more strongly in opposition, his spirit refused the claim. This is a very different picture from that of the widow's son whose earliest inspiration is his sense of duty to his mother, and adoring gratitude for her care and love —but it is perhaps as true a one. A young man may be placed in an unfair position by the excessive claim made upon his heart and conscience in this way, and so Walter felt it. He might have given all that, and more, if nothing had been asked of him; but when he was expected to feel so much, he felt himself half justified in feeling nothing. Thus the situation had become one of strained and continual opposition. It was a kind of duel, in which the younger combatant at least—the assailed person, whose free-will and independence were hampered by such perpetual requirements—never yielded a step. The other might do so, by turns throwing up her arms altogether, but not he.

It was with this feeling strong in his mind, and affecting his temper as nothing else does to such a degree, that he hastened along the street towards the rooms occupied by Captain Underwood, a personage

whom the ladies of Sloebury were unanimous in disliking. Nobody knew exactly where it was that he got his military title. He did not belong to any regiment in her Majesty's service. He had not even the humble claim of a militia officer; yet nobody dared say that there was anything fictitious about him, or stigmatise the captain as an impostor. Other captains and colonels and men-at-arms of undoubted character supported his claims; he belonged to one or two well-known clubs. An angry woman would sometimes fling an insult at him when her husband or son came home penniless after an evening in his company, wondering what they could see in an underbred fellow who was no more a captain (she would say in her wrath) than she was; but of these assertions there was no proof, and the vehemence of them naturally made the captain's partisans more and more eager in his favour. He had not been above six months in Sloebury, but everybody knew him. There was scarcely an evening in which half-a-dozen men did not congregate in his rooms, drawn together by that strange attraction which makes people meet who do not care in the least for each other's company, nor have anything to say to each other, yet are possibly less vacant in society than when alone, or find the murmur of many voices, the smoke of many cigars, exhilarating and agreeable. It was not every evening that the cards were produced. The captain was wary; he frightened nobody; he did not wish to give occasion

to the tremors of the ladies, whom he would have conciliated even, if he had been able; but there are men against whom the instinct of all women rises, as there are women from whom all men turn. It was only now and then that he permitted play. He spoke indeed strongly against it on many occasions. "What do you want with cards?" he would say. "A good cigar and a friend to talk to ought to be enough for any man." But twice or thrice in a week his scruples would give way. He was a tall, well-formed man, of an uncertain age, with burning hazel eyes, and a scar on his forehead got in that mysterious service to which now and then he made allusion, and which his friends concluded must have been in some foreign legion, or with Garibaldi, or some other irregular warfare. There were some who thought him a man, old for his age, of thirty-five, and some who, concluding him young for his age, and well preserved, credited him with twenty years more; but thirty-five or fifty-five, whichever it was, he was erect and strong, and well set up, and possessed an amount of experience and apparent knowledge of the world, at which the striplings of Sloebury admired and wondered, and which even the older men respected, as men in the country respect the mention of great names and incidents that have become historical. He had a way of recommending himself even to the serious, and would now and then break forth, as if reluctantly, into an account of some instance of faith or patience on the battlefield or the hospital which made

even the rector declare that to consider Underwood as an irreligious man was both unjust and unkind. So strong was the prejudice of the women, however, that Mrs. Wynn, always charitable, and whose silent protest was generally only made when the absent were blamed, shook her head at this testimony borne in favour of the Captain. She had no son to be led away, and her husband it need not be said, considering his position, was invulnerable; but with all her charity she could not believe in the religion of Captain Underwood. His rooms were very nice rooms in the best street in Sloebury, and if his society was what is called "mixed," yet the best people were occasionally to be met there, as well as those who were not the best.

There was a little stir in the company when Walter entered. To tell the truth, notwithstanding the wild mirth and dissipation which the ladies believed to go on in Captain Underwood's rooms, the society assembled there was at the moment dull and in want of a sensation. There had not been anything said for the course of two minutes at least. There was no play going on, and the solemn puff of smoke from one pair of lips after another would have been the height of monotony had it not been the wildest fun and gratification. The men in the room took pipes and cigars out of their mouths to welcome the new-comer. "Hallo, Walter!" they all said in different tones; for in Sloebury the use of Christian names was universal, everybody having known everybody else since the moment of their birth.

"Here comes Methven," said the owner of the rooms (it was one of his charms, in the eyes of the younger men, that he was not addicted to this familiarity), "in the odour of sanctity. It will do us all good to have an account of the rector's party. How did you leave the old ladies, my excellent boy?"

"Stole away like the fox, by Jove," said the hunting man, who was the pride of Sloebury.

"More like the mouse with the old cats after it," said another wit.

Now Walter had come in among them strong in his sense of right and in his sense of wrong, feeling himself at the same moment a sorry fool and an injured hero, a sufferer for the rights of man; and it would have been of great use to him in both these respects to have felt himself step into a superior atmosphere, into the heat of a political discussion, or even into noisy amusement, or the passion of play—anything which would rouse the spirits and energies, and show the action of a larger life. But to feel his own arrival a sort of godsend in the dulness, and to hear nothing but the heavy puff of all the smoke, and the very poor wit with which he was received, was sadly disconcerting, and made him more and more angry with himself and the circumstances which would give him no sort of support or comfort.

"The old ladies," he said, "were rather more lively than you fellows. You look as if you had all been poisoned in your wine, like the men in the opera, and

expected the wall to open and the monks and the coffins to come in."

"I knew that Methven would bring us some excellent lesson," said Captain Underwood. "Remember that we have all to die. Think, my friends, upon your latter end."

"Jump up here and give us a sermon, Wat."

"Don't tease him, he's dangerous."

"The old ladies have been too much for him."

This went on till Walter had settled down into his place, and lighted his pipe like the rest. He looked upon them with disenchanted eyes; not that he had ever entertained any very exalted opinion of his company; but to-night he was out of sympathy with all his surroundings, and he felt it almost a personal offence that there should be so little to attract and excite in this manly circle which thought so much more of itself than of any other, and was so scornful of the old ladies who after all were not old ladies: but the graver members of the community in general, with an ornamental adjunct of young womankind. On ordinary occasions no doubt Walter would have chimed in with the rest, but to-night he was dissatisfied and miserable, not sure of any sensation in particular, but one of scorn and distaste for his surroundings. He would have felt this in almost any conceivable case, but in the midst of this poor jesting and would-be wit, the effect was doubled. Was it worth while for this to waste his time, to offend the opinion of all his friends?

Such thoughts must always come in similar circumstances. Even in the most brilliant revelry there will be a pause, a survey of the position, a sense, however unwilling, that the game is not worth the candle. But here! They were all as dull as ditch water, he said to himself. Separately there was scarcely one whom he would have selected as an agreeable companion, and was it possible by joining many dulnesses together to produce a brilliant result? There was no doubt that Walter's judgment was jaundiced that evening; for he was not by any means so contemptuous of his friends on ordinary occasions; but he had been eager to find an excuse for himself, to be able to say that here was real life and genial society in place of the affected solemnity of the proper people. When he found himself unable to do this, he was struck as by a personal grievance, and sat moody and abstracted, bringing a chill upon everybody, till one by one the boon companions strolled away.

"A pretty set of fellows to talk of dulness," he cried, with a little burst, "as if they were not dull beyond all description themselves."

"Come, Methven, you are out of temper," said Captain Underwood. "They are good fellows enough when you are in the vein for them. Something has put you out of joint."

"Nothing at all," cried Walter, "except the sight of you all sitting as solemn as owls pretending to enjoy yourselves. At the rectory one yawned indeed, it was

the genius of the place—but to hear all those dull dogs laughing at that, as if they were not a few degrees worse! Is there nothing but dulness in life? Is everything the same—one way or another—and nothing to show for it all, when it is over, but tediousness and discontent?"

Underwood looked at him keenly with his fiery eyes.

"So you've come to that already, have you?" he said. "I thought you were too young and foolish."

"I am not so young as not to know that I am behaving like an idiot," Walter said. Perhaps he had a little hope of being contradicted and brought back to his own esteem.

But instead of this, Captain Underwood only looked at him again and laughed.

"I know," he said: "the conscience has its tremors, especially after an evening at the rectory. You see how well respectability looks, how comfortable it is."

"I do nothing of the sort," Walter cried indignantly. "I see how dull you are, you people who scoff at respectability, and I begin to wonder whether it is not better to be dull and thrive than to be dull and perish. They seem much the same thing so far as enjoyment goes."

"You want excitement," said the other carelessly. "I allow there is not much of that here."

"I want something," cried Walter. "Cards even are better than nothing. I want to feel that I have blood in my veins."

"My dear boy, all that is easily explained. You want money. Money is the thing that mounts the blood in the veins. With money you can have as much excitement, as much movement as you like. Let people say what they please, there is nothing else that does it," said the man of experience. He took a choice cigar leisurely from his case as he spoke. "A bit of a country town like this, what can you expect from it? There is no go in them. They risk a shilling, and go away frightened if they lose. If they don't go to church on Sunday they feel all the remorse of a villain in a play. It's all petty here—everything's petty, both the vices and the virtues. I don't wonder you find it slow. What I find it, I needn't say."

"Why do you stop here, then?" said Walter, not unnaturally, with a momentary stare of surprise. Then he resumed, being full of his own subject. "I know I'm an ass," he said. "I loaf about here doing nothing when I ought to be at work. I don't know why I do it; but neither do I know how to get out of it. You, that's quite another thing. You have no call to stay. I wonder you do: why do you? If I were as free as you, I should be off—before another day."

"Come along then," said Underwood, good-humouredly. "I'll go if you'll go."

At this Walter shook his head.

"I have no money you know. I ought to be in an office or doing something. I can't go off to shoot here or fish there, like you."

"By and by—by and by. You have time enough to wait."

Walter gave him a look of surprise.

"There is nothing to wait for," he said. "Is that why you have said so many things to me about seeing life? I have nothing. We've got no money in the family. I may wait till doomsday, but it will do nothing for me."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Underwood. "Oh, you needn't devour me with your eyes. I know nothing of your family affairs. I suppose of course that by and by, in the course of nature——"

"You mean," said Walter, turning pale, "when my mother dies. No, I'm not such a wretched cad as that: if I didn't know I should get next to nothing then, I——" (His conscience nearly tripped this young man up, running into his way so hurriedly that he caught his foot unawares.) Then he stopped and grew red, staring at his companion. "Most of what she has dies with her, if that's what you're thinking of. There is nothing in that to build upon. And I'm glad of it," the young man cried.

"I beg your pardon, Methven," said the other. "But it needn't be that; there are other ways of getting rich."

"I don't know any of them, unless by work: and how am I to work? It is so easy to speak. What can I work at? and where am I to get it?—there is the question. I hear enough on that subject—as if I were

a tailor or a shoemaker that could find something to do at any corner. There is no reason in it," the young man said, so hotly, and with such a flush of resentful obstinacy, that the fervour of his speech betrayed him. He was like a man who had outrun himself, and paused, out of breath.

"You'll see; something will turn up," said Underwood, with a laugh.

"What can turn up?—nothing. Suppose I go to New Zealand and come back at fifty with my fortune made—Fifty's just the age, isn't it, to begin to enjoy yourself," cried Walter, scornfully; "when you have not a tooth left, nor a faculty perfect?" He was so young that the half-century appeared to him like the age of Methusaleh, and men who lived to that period as having outlived all that is worth living for. His mentor laughed a little uneasily, as if he had been touched by this chance shot.

"It is not such a terrible age after all," he said. "A man can still enjoy himself when he is fifty; but I grant you that at twenty-four it's a long time to wait for your pleasure. However, let us hope something will turn up before then. Supposing, for the sake of argument, you were to come in to your fortune more speedily, I wonder what you would do with it—eh? you are such a terrible fellow for excitement. The turf?"

"All that is folly," said Walter, getting up abruptly. "Nothing more, thanks. I am coming in to no fortune. And you don't understand me a bit," he said, turning

at the door of the room, to look back upon the scene where he had himself spent so many hours, made piquant by a sense of that wrongdoing which supplies excitement when other motives fail. The chairs standing about as their occupants had thrust them away from the table, the empty glasses upon it, the disorder of the room, struck him with a certain sense of disgust. It was a room intended by nature to be orderly and sober, with heavy country-town furniture, and nothing about it that could throw any grace on disarray. The master of the place stood against the table swaying a somewhat heavy figure over it, and gazing at the young man with his fiery eyes. Walter's rudeness did not please him, any more than his abrupt withdrawal.

"Don't be too sure of that," he said, with an effort to retain his good-humoured aspect. "If I don't understand you, I should like to know who does? and when that fortune comes, you will remember what I say."

"Pshaw!" Walter cried, impatiently turning away. A nod of his head was all the good-night he gave. He hurried down as he had hurried up, still as little contented, as full of dissatisfaction as when he came. This man who thought he understood him, who intended to influence him, revolted the young man's uneasy sense of independence, as much as did the bond of more lawful authority. Did Underwood, *too*, think him a child not able to guide himself? It was very late by this time, and the streets very silent. He walked quickly home through the wintry darkness of November, with a mind

as thoroughly out of tune as it is possible to imagine. He had gone to Underwood's in the hot impulse of opposition, with the hope of getting rid temporarily, at least, of the struggle within him; but he had not got rid of it. The dull jokes of the assembled company had only made the raging of the inward storm more sensible, and the jaunty and presumptuous misconception with which his host received his involuntary confidences afterwards, had aggravated instead of soothing his mind. Indeed, Underwood's pretence at knowing all about it, his guesses and attempts to sound his companion's mind, and the blundering interpretation of it into which he stumbled, filled Walter with double indignation and disgust. This man too he had thought much of, and expected superior intelligence from—and all that he had to say was an idiotic anticipation of some miraculous coming into a fortune which Walter was aware was as likely to happen to the beggar on the streets as to himself. He had been angry with nature and his mother when he left her door; he was angry with everybody when he returned to it, though his chief anger of all, and the root of all the others, was that anger with himself, which burnt within his veins, and which is the hardest of all others to quench out.

CHAPTER III.

WALTER was very late next morning as he had been very late at night. The ladies had breakfasted long before, and there was a look of reproach in the very table-cloth left there so much after the usual time, and scrupulously cleared of everything that the others had used, and arranged at one end, with the dish kept hot for him, and the small teapot just big enough for one, which was a sermon in itself. His mother was seated by the fire with her weekly books, which she was adding up. She said scarcely anything to him, except the morning greeting, filling out his tea with a gravity which was all the more crushing that there was nothing in it to object to, nothing to resent. Adding up accounts of itself is not cheerful work; but naturally the young man resented this seriousness all the more because he had no right to do so. It was intolerable, he felt, to sit and eat in presence of that silent figure partly turned away from him, jotting down the different amounts on a bit of paper, and absorbed in that occupation as if unconscious of his presence. Even scolding was better than this; Walter was perfectly conscious of

all it was in her power to say. He knew by heart her remonstrances and appeals. But he disliked the silence more than all. He longed to take her by the shoulders, and cry, "What is it? What have you got to say to me? What do you mean by sitting there like a stone figure, and *meaning* it all the same!" He did not do this, knowing it would be foolish, and gave his constant antagonist a certain advantage; but he longed to get rid of some of his own exasperation by such an act. It was with a kind of force over himself that he ate his breakfast, going through all the forms, prolonging it to the utmost of his power, helping himself with deliberate solemnity in defiance of the spectator, who seemed so absorbed in her own occupation, but was, he felt sure, watching his every movement. It was not, however, until he had come to an end of his prolonged meal and of his newspaper, that his mother spoke.

"Do you think," she said, "that it would be possible for you to write that letter to Mr. Milnathort of which I have spoken so often, to-day?"

"Oh, quite possible," said Walter, carelessly.

"Will you do it, then? It seems to me very important to your interests. Will you really do it, and do it to-day?"

"I'll see about it," Walter said.

"I don't ask you to see about it. It is nothing very difficult. I ask you to do it at once—to-day."

He gazed at her for a moment with an angry obstinacy.

"I see no particular occasion for all this haste. It has stood over a good many days. Why should you insist so upon it now?"

"Every day that it has been put off has been a mistake. It should have been done at once," Mrs. Methven said.

"I'll see about it," he said carelessly; and he went out of the room with a sense of having exasperated her as usual, which was almost pleasant.

At the bottom of his heart he meant to do what his mother had asked of him: but he would not betray his good intentions. He preferred to look hostile even when he was in the mind to be obedient. He went away to the little sitting-room which was appropriated to him, where his pipes adorned the mantelpiece, and sat down to consider the situation. To write a letter was not a great thing to do, and he fully meant to do it; but after he had mused a little angrily upon the want of perception which made his mother adopt that cold and hectoring tone, when if she had asked him gently he would have done it in a minute, he put forth his hand and drew a book towards him. It was not either a new or an entertaining book, but it secured his idle attention until he suddenly remembered that it was time to go out. The letter was not written, but what did that matter? The post did not go out till the afternoon, and there was plenty of time between that time and this to write half-a-dozen letters. It would do very well, he thought, when he came in for

lunch. So he threw down the book and got his hat and went out.

Mrs. Methven, who was on the watch, hearing his every movement, came into his room after he was gone, and looked round with eager eyes to see if the letter was written, if there was any trace of it. Perhaps he had taken it out with him to post it, she thought: and though it was injurious to her that she should not know something more about a piece of business in which he was not the sole person concerned, yet it gave her a sort of relief to think that so much at least he had done. She went back to her books with an easier mind. She was far from being a rich woman, but her son had known none of her little difficulties, her efforts to make ends meet. She had thought it wrong to trouble his childhood with such confidences, and he had grown up thinking nothing on the subject, without any particular knowledge of, or interest in, her affairs, taking everything for granted. It was her own fault, she said to herself, and so it was to some extent. She would sometimes think that if she had it to do over again she would change all that. How often do we think this, and with what bitter regret, in respect to the children whom people speak of as wax in our hands, till we suddenly wake up and find them iron! She had kept her difficulties out of Walter's way, and instead of being grateful to her for so doing, he was simply indifferent, neither inquiring nor caring to know. Her own doing! It was easier to herself, yet bitter beyond

telling, to acknowledge it to be so. Just at this time, when Christmas was approaching, the ends took a great deal of tugging and coaxing to bring them together. A few of Walter's bills had come in unexpectedly, putting her poor balance altogether wrong. Miss Merivale contributed a little, but only a little, to the housekeeping; for Mrs. Methven was both proud and liberal, and understood giving better than receiving. She went back to the dining-room, where all her books lay upon the table, near the fire. Her reckoning had advanced much since she had begun it, with Walter sitting at breakfast. Her faculties had been all absorbed in him and what he was doing. Now she addressed herself to her accounts with a strenuous effort. It is hard work to balance a small sum of money against a large number of bills, to settle how to divide it so as that everybody shall have something, and the mouths of hungry creditors be stopped. Perhaps we might say that this was one of the fine arts—so many pounds here, so many there, keeping credit afloat, and the wolf of debt from the door. Mrs. Methven was skilled in it. She went to this work, feeling all its difficulty and burden: yet, with a little relief, not because she saw any way out of her difficulties, but because Walter had written that letter. It was always something done, she thought, in her simplicity, and something might come of it, some way in which he could get the means of exercising his faculties, perhaps of distinguishing himself even yet.

Walter for his part strolled away through the little town in his usual easy way. It was a fine, bright, winterly morning, not cold, yet cold enough to make brisk walking pleasant, and stir the blood in young veins. There was no football going on, nor any special amusement. He could not afford to hunt, and the only active winter exercise which he could attain was limited to this game—of which there was a good deal at Sloebury—and skating, when it pleased Providence to send ice, which was too seldom. He looked in upon one or two of his cronies, and played a game of billiards, and hung about the High Street to see what was going on. There was nothing particular going on, but the air was fresh, and the sun shining, and a little pleasant movement about, much more agreeable at least than sitting in a stuffy little room writing a troublesome letter which he felt sure would not do the least good. Finally, he met Captain Underwood, who regarded him with a look which Walter would have called anxious had he been able to imagine any possible reason why Underwood should entertain any anxiety on his account.

"Well! any news?" the captain cried.

"News! What news should there be in this dead-alive place?" Walter said.

The other looked at him keenly as if to see whether he was quite sincere, and then said, "Come and have some lunch."

He was free of all the best resorts in Sloebury, this mysterious man. He belonged to the club, he was

greatly at his ease in the hotel—everything was open to him. Walter, who had but little money of his own, and could not quite cut the figure he wished, was not displeased to be thus exhibited as the captain's foremost ally.

"I thought you might have come into that fortune, you are looking so spruce," the captain said, and laughed. But though he laughed he kept an eye on the young man as if the pleasantry meant more than appeared. Walter felt a momentary irritation with this, which seemed to him a very bad joke; but he went with the captain all the same, not without a recollection of the table at home, at which, after waiting three quarters of an hour or so, and watching at the window for his coming, the ladies would at last sit down. But he was not a child to be forced to attendance at every meal, he said to himself. The captain's attentions to him were great, and it was a very nice little meal that they had together.

"I expect you to do great things for me when you come into your fortune. You had better engage me at once as your guide, philosopher, and friend," he said, with a laugh. "Of course you will quit Sloebury, and make yourself free of all this bondage."

"Oh, of course," said Walter, humouring the joke, though it was so bad a one in every way.

He could not quarrel with his host at his own table, and perhaps after all it was more dignified to take it with good humour.

"You must not go in for mere expense," the captain said; "you must make it pay. I can put you up to a thing or two. You must not go into the world like a pigeon to be plucked. It would effect my personal honour if a pupil of mine—for I consider you as a pupil of mine, Methven, I think I have imparted to you a thing or two. You are not quite the simpleton you used to be, do you think you are?"

Walter received this with great gravity, though he tried to look as if he were not offended.

"Was I a simpleton?" he said. "I suppose in one's own case one never sees."

"Were you a simpleton!" said the other, with a laugh, and then he stopped himself, always keenly watching the young man's face, and perceiving that he was going too far. "But I flatter myself you could hold your own at whist with any man now," the captain said.

This pleased the young man; his gravity unbended a little; there was a visible relaxation of the corners of his mouth. To be praised is always agreeable. Moral applause, indeed, may be taken with composure, but who could hear himself applauded for his whist-playing without an exhilaration of the heart? He said, with satisfaction, "I always was pretty good at games," at which his instructor laughed again, almost too much for perfect good breeding.

"I like to have young fellows like you to deal with," he said, "fellows with a little spirit, that are born for

better things. Your country-town young man is as fretful and frightened when he loses a few shillings as if it were thousands. But that's one of the reasons why I feel you're born to luck, my boy. I know a man of liberal breeding whenever I see him, he is not frightened about a nothing. That's one of the things I like in you, Methven. You deserve a fortune, and you deserve to have me for your guide, philosopher, and friend."

All this was said by way of joke; but it was strange to see the steady watch which he kept on the young man's face. One would have said a person of importance whom Underwood meant to try his strength with, but guardedly, without going too far, and even on whom he was somehow dependent, anxious to make a good impression. Walter, who knew his own favour to be absolutely without importance, and that Underwood above all, his host and frequent entertainer, could be under no possible delusion on the subject, was puzzled, yet flattered, feeling that only some excellence on his part, undiscovered by any of his other acquaintances, could account for this. So experienced a person could have "no motive" in thus paying court to a penniless and prospectless youth. Walter was perplexed, but he was gratified too. He had not seen many of the captain's kind; nobody who knew so many people or who was so much at his ease with the world. Admiration of this vast acquaintance, and of the familiarity with which the captain treated things and people of which others spoke with bated breath, had varied in his

mind with a fluctuating sense that Underwood was not exactly so elevated a person as he professed to be, and even that there were occasional vulgarities in this man of the world. Walter felt these, but in his ignorance represented to himself that perhaps they were right enough, and only seemed vulgar to him who knew no better. And to-day there is no doubt he was somewhat intoxicated by this flattery. It must be disinterested, for what could he do for anybody? He confided to the captain more than he had ever done before of his own position. He described how he was being urged to write to old Milnathort. "He is an old lawyer in Scotland—what they call a writer—and it is supposed he might be induced to take me into his office, for the sake of old associations. I don't know what the associations are, but the position does not smile upon me," Walter said.

"Your family then is a Scotch family?" said the captain with a nod of approval. "I thought as much."

"I don't know that I've got a family," said Walter.

"On the contrary, Methven is a very good name. There are half-a-dozen baronets at least, and a peer—you must have heard of him, Lord Erradeen."

"Oh yes, I've heard of him," Walter said with a conscious look.

If he had been more in the world he would have said "he is a cousin of mine," but he was aware that the strain of kindred was very far off, and he was at once too shy and too proud to claim it. His companion

waited apparently for the disclosure, then finding it did not come opened the way.

"If he's a relation of yours, it's to him you ought to write; very likely he would do something for you. They are a curious family. I've had occasion to know something about them."

"I think you know everybody, Underwood."

"Well, I have knocked about the world a great deal; in that way one comes across a great many people. I saw a good deal of the present lord at one time. He was a very queer man—they are all queer. If you are one of them you'll have to bear your share in it. There is a mysterious house they have—You would think I was an idiot if I told you half the stories I have heard——"

"About the Erradeens?"

"About everybody," said the captain evasively. "There is scarcely a family, that, if you go right into it, has not something curious about them. We all have; but those that last and continue keep it on record. I could tell you the wildest tales about So-and-so and So-and-so, very ordinary people to look at, but with stories that would make your hair stand on end."

"We have nothing to do with things of that sort. My people have always been straightforward and above-board."

"For as much as you know, perhaps; but go back three or four generations and how can you tell? We have all of us ancestors that perhaps were not much to brag of."

Walter caught Underwood's eye as he said this, and perhaps there was a twinkle in it, for he laughed.

"It is something," he said, "to have ancestors at all."

"If they were the greatest blackguards in the world," the captain said with a responsive laugh, "that's what I think. You don't want any more of my revelations? Well, never mind, probably I shall have you coming to me some of these days quite humbly to beg for more information. You are not cut out for an attorney's office. It is very virtuous, of course, to give yourself up to work and turn your back upon life."

"Virtue be hanged," said Walter, with some excitement, "it is not virtue, but necessity, which I take to be the very opposite. I know I'm wasting my time, but I mean to turn over a new leaf. And as the first evidence of that, as soon as I go home I shall write to old Milnathort."

"Not to-day," said Underwood, looking at his watch; "the post has gone; twenty-four hours more to think about it will do you no harm."

Walter started to his feet, and it was with a real pang that he saw how the opportunity had escaped him, and his intention in spite of himself been balked; a flush of shame came over his face. He felt that, if never before, here was a genuine occasion for blame. To be sure, the same thing had happened often enough before, but he had never perhaps so fully intended to do what was required of him. He sat down again with a

muttered curse at himself and his own folly. There was nothing to be said for him. He had meant to turn over a new leaf, and yet this day was just like the last. The thought made his heart sick for the moment. But what was the use of making a fuss and betraying himself to a stranger? He sat down again, with a self-disgust which made him glad to escape from his own company. Underwood's talk might be shallow enough, perhaps his pretence at knowledge was not very well founded, but he was safer company than conscience, and that burning and miserable sense of moral impotence which is almost worse than the more tragic stings of conscience. To find out that your resolution is worth nothing, after you have put yourself to the trouble of making it, and that habit is more strong than any motive, is not a pleasant thing to think of. Better let the captain talk about Lord Erradeen, or any other lord in the peerage. Underwood, being encouraged with a few questions, talked very largely on this subject. He gave the young man many pieces of information, which indeed he could have got in Debrett if he had been anxious on the subject; and as the afternoon wore on they strolled out again for another promenade up and down the more populous parts of Sloebury, and there fell in with other idlers like themselves; and when the twilight yielded to the more cheerful light of the lamps, betook themselves to whist, which was sometimes played in the captain's rooms at that immoral hour. Sloebury, even the most advanced portion of it, had been horrified

at the thought of whist before dinner when the captain first suggested it, but that innocent alarm had long since melted away. There was nothing dangerous about it, no stakes which any one could be hurt by losing. When Walter, warned by the breaking up of the party that it was the hour for dinner, took his way home also, he was the winner of a sixpence or two, and no more: there had been nothing wrong in the play. But when he turned the corner of Underwood's street and found himself with the wind in his face on his way home, the revulsion of feeling from something like gaiety to a rush of disagreeable anticipations, a crowd of uncomfortable thoughts, was pitiful. In spite of all our boastings of home and home influence, how many experience this change the moment they turn their face in the direction of that centre where it is conventional to suppose all comfort and shelter is! There is a chill, an abandonment of pleasant sensations, a preparation for those that are not pleasant. Walter foresaw what he would find there with an impatience and resentment which were almost intolerable. Behind the curtain, between the laths of the Venetian blind, his mother would be secretly on the outlook watching for his return; perhaps even she had stolen quietly to the door, and, sheltered in the darkness of the porch, was looking out; or, if not that, the maid who opened the door would look reproachfully at him, and ask if he was going to dress, or if she might serve the dinner at once: it must have been waiting already nearly half an hour. He went on very quickly,

but his thoughts lingered and struggled with the strong disinclination that possessed him. How much he would have given not to go home at all! how little pleasure he expected when he got there! His mother most likely would be silent, pale with anger, saying little, while Cousin Sophia would get up a little conversation. She would talk lightly about anything that might have been happening, and Walter would perhaps exert himself to give Sophia back her own, and show his mother that he cared nothing about her displeasure. And then when dinner was over, he would hurry out again, glad to be released. Home: this was what it had come to be: and nothing could mend it so far as either mother or son could see. Oh, terrible incompatibility, unapproachableness of one soul to another! To think that they should be so near, yet so far away. Even in the case of husband and wife the severance is scarcely so terrible; for they have come towards each other out of different spheres, and if they do not amalgamate, there are many secondary causes that may be blamed, differences of nature and training and thought. But a mother with her child, whom she has brought up, whose first opinions she has implanted, who ought naturally to be influenced by her ways of thinking, and even by prejudices and superstitions in favour of her way! It was not, however, this view of the question which moved the young man. It was the fact of his own bondage, the compulsion he was under to return to dinner, to give some partial obedience to the rules of the house,

and to confess that he had not written that letter to Mr. Milnathort.

When he came in sight of the house, however, he became aware insensibly, he could scarcely tell how, of some change in its aspect: what was it? It was lighted up in the most unusual way. The window of the spare room was shining not only with candlelight, but with firelight, his own room was lighted up; the door was standing open, throwing out a warm flood of light into the street, and in the centre of this light stood Mrs. Methven with her white shawl over her head, not at all concealing herself, gazing anxiously in the direction from which he was coming.

"I think I will send for him," he heard her say; "he has, very likely, stepped into Captain Underwood's, and he is apt to meet friends there who will not let him go."

Her voice was soft — there was no blame in it, though she was anxious. She was speaking to some one behind her, a figure in a great coat. Walter was in the shadow and invisible. He paused in his surprise to listen.

"I must get away by the last train," he heard the voice of the muffled figure say somewhat pettishly.

"Oh, there is plenty of time for that," cried his mother; and then she gave a little cry of pleasure, and said, "And, at a good moment, here he is!"

He came in somewhat dazzled, and much astonished, into the strong light in the open doorway. Mrs.

Methven's countenance was all radiant and glowing with pleasure. She held out her hand to him eagerly.

"We have been looking for you," she cried; "I have had a great surprise. Walter, this is Mr. Milnathort."

Puzzled, startled, and yet somewhat disappointed, Walter paused in the hall, and looked at a tall old man with a face full of crotchets and intelligence, who stood with two great coats unbuttoned, and a comforter half unwound from his throat, under the lamp. His features were high and thin, his eyes invisible under their deep sockets.

"Now, you will surely take off your coat, and consent to go up-stairs, and make yourself comfortable," said Mrs. Methven, with a thrill of excitement in her voice. "This is Walter. He has heard of you all his life. Without any reference to the nature of your communication, he must be glad, indeed, to make your acquaintance—"

She gave Walter a look of appeal as she spoke. He was so much surprised that it was with difficulty he found self-possession to murmur a few words of civility. A feeling that Mr. Milnathort must have come to look after that letter which had never been written came in with the most wonderfully confusing, half ludicrous effect into his mind, like one of the inadequate motives and ineffable conclusions of a dream. Mr. Milnathort made a stiff little bow in reply.

"I will remain till the last train. In the mean time the young gentleman had better be informed, Mrs. Methven."

She put out her hands again. "A moment—give us a moment first."

The old lawyer stood still and looked from the mother to the son. Perhaps to his keen eyes it was revealed that it would be well she should have the advantage of any pleasant revelation.

"I will," he said, "madam, avail myself of your kind offer to go up-stairs and unroll myself out of these trappings of a long journey; and in the mean time you will, perhaps, like to tell him the news yourself: he will like it all the better if he hears it from his mother."

Mrs. Methven bowed her head, having, apparently, no words at her command: and stood looking after him till he disappeared on the stairs, following the maid, who had been waiting with a candle lighted in her hand. When he was gone, she seized Walter hurriedly by the arm, and drew him towards the little room, the nearest, which was his ordinary sitting-room. Her hand grasped him with unnecessary force in her excitement. The room was dark—he could not see her face, the only light in it being the reflection of the lamp outside.

"Oh, Walter!" she cried; oh, my boy! I don't know how to tell you the news. This useless life is all over for you, and another—oh, how different—

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another—God grant it happy and great, oh, God grant it! blessed and noble!—"

Her voice choked with excitement and fast-coming tears. She drew him towards her into her arms.

"It will take you from me—but what of that, if it makes you happy and good? I have been no guide to you, but God will be your guide: His leadings were all dark to me, but now I see—"

"Mother," he cried, with a strange impulse he could not understand, putting his arm round her, "I did not write that letter: I have done nothing I promised or meant to do. I am sick to the heart to think what a fool and a cad I am—for the love of God tell me what it is!"

CHAPTER IV.

All Sloebury was aware next morning that something of the most extraordinary character had happened to young Walter Methven. The rumour even reached the club on the same evening. First the report was that he had got a valuable appointment, at which the gentlemen shook their heads; next that he had come into a fortune: they laughed with one accord at this. Then, as upon a sudden gale of wind, there blew into the smoking-room, then full of tobacco, newspapers, and men, a whisper which made everybody turn pale. This was one reason, if not the chief, why that evening was one of the shortest ever known at the club, which did not indeed generally keep very late hours, but still was occupied by its *habitués* till ten or eleven o'clock, when the serious members would go away, leaving only the boys, who never could have enough of it. But on that evening even the young men cleared off about ten or so. They wanted to know what it meant. Some of them went round to Captain Underwood's where Walter was so often to be found, with a confidence that at least Underwood would know; the more respectable

members of society went home to their families to spread the news, and half-a-dozen mothers at least went to bed that night with a disagreeable recollection that they had individually and deliberately "broken off" an incipient flirtation or more, in which Walter had been one of the parties concerned. But the hopeful ones said to themselves, "Lizzie has but to hold up her little finger to bring him back." This was before the whole was known. The young men who had hurried to Captain Underwood's were received by that gentleman with an air of importance and of knowing more than he would tell, which impressed their imaginations deeply. He allowed that he had always known that there was a great deal of property, and perhaps a title concerned, but declared that he was not at liberty to say any more. Thus the minds of all were prepared for a great revelation; and it is safe to say that from one end of Sloebury to the other Walter's name was in everybody's mouth. It had been always believed that the Methvens were people of good connections, and of later years it had been whispered by the benevolent as a reason for Walter's inaction that he had grand relations, who at the proper moment would certainly interfere and set everything right for him. Others, however, were strenuous in their denial and ridicule of this, asking, was his mother a woman to conceal any advantages she had?—for they did not understand the kind of pride in which Mrs. Methven was so strong. And then it was clear that not only did the grand relations do nothing

for Walter, but he did not even have an invitation from them, and went from home only when his mother went to the sea-side. Thus there was great doubt and wonder, and in some quarters an inclination to treat the rumour as a canard, and to postpone belief. At the same time everybody believed it, more or less, at the bottom of their hearts, feeling that a thing so impossible must be true.

But when it burst fully upon the world next morning along with the pale November daylight, but much more startling, that Walter Methven had succeeded as the next heir to his distant cousin, who was the head of the family, and was now Lord Erradeen, a great potentate, with castles in the Highlands and fat lands further south, and moors and deer forests and everything that the heart of man could think of, the town was swept not only by a thrill of wonder, but of emotion. Nobody was indifferent to this extraordinary romance. Some, when they had got over the first bewilderment, received it with delightful anticipations, as if the good fortune which had befallen Walter was in some respects good fortune also for themselves; whereas many others were almost angry at this sudden elevation over their heads of one who certainly did not deserve any better, if indeed half so well as they did. But nobody was indifferent. It was the greatest excitement that had visited Sloebury for years—even it might be said for generations. Lord Erradeen! it took away everybody's breath.

Among the circle of Walter's more intimate acquaintance, the impression made was still deeper, as may be supposed. The commotion in the mind of the rector, who indeed was old enough to have taken it with more placidity, was such that he hurried in from morning service without taking off his cassock. He was a good Churchman, but not so far gone as to walk about the world in that ecclesiastical garment

"Can you imagine what has happened?" he said, bursting in upon Mrs. Wynn, who was delicate and did not go to church in the winter mornings. "Young Walter Methven, that you all made such a talk about——"

This was unfair, because she had never made any talk—being a woman who did not talk save most sparingly. She was tempted for a moment to forestall him by telling him she already knew, but her heart failed her, and she only shook her head a little in protest against this calumny, and waited smilingly for what he had to say. She could not take away from him the pleasure of telling this wonderful piece of news.

"Why it was only the night before last he was here—most of us rather disapproving of him, poor boy," said the rector. "Well, Lydia, that young fellow that was a good-for-nothing, you know—doing nothing, never exerting himself: well, my dear! the most extraordinary thing has happened—the most wonderful piece of good fortune——"

"Don't keep me on tenterhooks, Julius; I have heard some buzzing of talk already."

"I should think you had! the town is full of it; they tell me that everybody you meet on the streets—Lydia!" said the rector with solemnity, drawing close to her to make his announcement more imposing, "that boy is no longer simple Mr. Walter Methven. He is Lord Erradeen——"

"Lord what?" cried the old lady. It was part of her character to be a little deaf, or rather hard of hearing, which is the prettier way of stating the fact. It was supposed by some that this was one of the reasons why, when any one was blamed, she always shook her head.

"Lord Er-ra-deen; but bless me, it is not the name that is so wonderful, it is the fact. Lord Erradeen—a great personage—a man of importance. You don't show any surprise, Lydia! and yet it is the most astonishing incident without comparison that has happened in the parish these hundred years."

"I wonder what his mother is thinking," Mrs. Wynn said.

"If her head is turned nobody could be surprised. Of course, like every other mother, she thinks her son worthy of every exaltation."

"I wish she was of that sort," the old lady said.

"Every woman is of that sort," said the rector with hasty dogmatism; "and, in one way, I am rather sorry, for it will make her feel she was perfectly right in encouraging him, and that would be such a terrible

example for others. The young men will all take to idling——"

"But it is not the idling, but the fact that there is a peerage in the family——"

"You can't expect," cried the rector, who was not lucid, "that boys or women either will reason back so far as that. It will be a bad example: and, in the mean time, it is a most astonishing fact. But you don't seem in the least excited. I thought you would have jumped out of your chair—out of the body almost."

"I am too rheumatic for that," said Mrs. Wynn with a smile: then, "I wonder if she will come and tell me," the old lady said.

"I should think she does not know whether she is on her head or her heels," cried the rector; "I don't feel very sure myself. And Walter! What a change, to be sure, for that boy! I hope he will make a good use of it. I hope he will not dart off with Underwood and such fellows and make a fool of himself. Mind, I don't mean that I think so badly of Underwood," he added after a moment, for this was a subject on which, being mollified as previously mentioned, the rector took the male side of the question. Mrs. Wynn received the protest in perfect silence, not even shaking her head.

"But if he took a fancy for horses or that sort of thing," Mr. Wynn added with a moment's hesitation; then he brightened up again—"of course it is better that he should know somebody who has a little experience in any case; and you will perceive, my dear, there

is a great difference between a penniless youth like Walter Methven getting such notions in his head which lead only to ruin, and young Lord Erradeen dabbling a little in amusements which, after all, have no harm in them if not carried too far, and are natural in his rank —but you women are always prejudiced on such a point."

"I did not say anything, my dear," the old lady said.

"Oh, no, you don't say anything," cried the rector fretfully, "but I see it in every line of your shawl and every frill of your cap. You are just stiff with prejudice so far as Underwood is concerned, who really is not at all a bad fellow when you come to know him, and is always respectful to religion, and shows a right feeling —but one might as well try to fly as to convince you when you have taken a prejudice."

"Mrs. Wynn made no protest against this. She said only, "It is a great ordeal for a boy to pass through. I wonder if his mother——" And here she paused, not having yet, perhaps, formulated into words the thoughts that arose in her heart.

"It is to be hoped that she will let him alone," the rector said; "she has indulged him in everything hitherto; but just now, when he is far better left to himself, no doubt she will be wanting to interfere."

"Do you think she has indulged him in everything?" said the old lady; but she did not think it necessary to accuse her husband of prejudice. Perhaps he understood Captain Underwood as much better as she under-

stood Mrs. Methven; so she said nothing more. She was the only individual in Sloebury who had any notion of the struggle in which Walter's mother had wrecked so much of her own peace.

"There cannot be any two opinions on that subject," said the rector. "Poor lad! You will excuse me, my dear, but I am always sorry for a boy left to a woman's training. He is either a mere milksop or a ne'er-do-well. Walter is not a milksop, and here has Providence stepped in, in the most wonderful way, to save him from being the other: but that is no virtue of hers. You will stand up, of course, for your own side."

The old lady smiled and shook her head. "I think every child is the better for having both its parents, Julius, if that is what you mean."

This was not exactly what he meant, but it took the wind out of the rector's sails. "Yes, it is an ordeal for him," he said, "but, I am sure, if my advice can do him any good, it is at his service; and, though I have been out of the way of many things for some time, yet I dare say the world is very much what it was, and I used to know it well enough."

"He will ask for nobody's advice," said Mrs. Wynn.

"Which makes it all the more desirable he should have it," cried the rector; and then he said, "Bless me! I have got my cassock on still. Tell John to take it down to the vestry—though, by the way, there is a button off, and you might as well have it put on for me, as it is here."

Mrs. Wynn executed the necessary repair of the cassock with her own hands. Though she was rheumatic, and did not care to leave her chair oftener than was necessary, she had still the use of her hands, and she had a respect for all the accessories of the clerical profession. She was sitting examining the garment to see if any other feeblenesses were apparent, in which a stitch in time might save after labours, when, with a little eager tap at the door, another visitor came in. This was a young lady of three or four and twenty, with a good deal of the beauty which consists in fresh complexion and pleasant colour. Her hair was light brown, warm in tone; her eyes were brown and sparkling; her cheeks and lips bloomed with health. She had a pretty figure, full of life and energy—everything, in short, that is necessary to make up a pretty girl, without any real loveliness or deeper grace. She came in quickly, brimming over, as was evident, with something which burst forth as soon as she had given the old lady the hasty conventional kiss of greeting, and which, as a matter of course, turned out to be the news of which Sloebury was full.

"Did you ever hear anything so wonderful?" she said. "Walter Methven, that nobody thought anything of—and now he is turned into a live lord! a real peer of parliament! they say. I thought mamma would have fainted when she heard it."

"Why should your mamma faint when she heard of it, July? It is very pleasant news."

"Oh, Aunt Lydia! don't you know why? I am so angry: I feel as if I should never speak to her again. Don't you remember? And I always thought you had some hand in it. Oh, you sit there and look so innocent, but that is because you are so deep."

"Am I deep?" the old lady asked with a smile.

"You are the deepest person I ever knew: you see through us all, and you just throw in a word; and then, when people act upon it, you look so surprised. I heard you myself remark to mamma how often Walter Methven was at our house."

"Yes, I think I did remark it," Mrs. Wynn said.

"And what was the harm? He liked to come, and he liked me; and I hope you don't think I am the sort of person to forget myself and think too much about a man."

"I thought you were letting him be seen with you too often, July, that is true."

"You thought it might keep others off that were more eligible? Well, that is what I supposed you meant, for I never like to take a bad view. But, you see, there was somebody that was eligible; and here has he turned, all at once, into the very best match within a hundred miles. If mamma had only let things alone, what prospects might be opening upon me now!"

"Half-a-dozen girls, I am afraid, may say just the same," said Mrs. Wynn.

"Well, what does that matter? He had nothing

else to do. When a young man has nothing to do he must be making up to somebody. I don't blame him a bit; that is what makes us girls always ready for a flirtation. Time hangs so heavy on our hands. And only think, Aunt Lydia, if things had been allowed to go on (and I could always have thrown him off if anything better turned up), only think what might have happened to me now. I might be working a coronet in all my new handkerchiefs," cried the girl: "only imagine! oh, oh, oh!"

And she pretended to cry; but there was a sparkle of nervous energy all the same in her eyes, as if she were eager for the chase, and scarcely able to restrain her impatience. Mrs. Wynn shook her head at her visitor with a smile.

"You are not so worldly as you give yourself out to be," she said.

"Oh, that just shows how little you know. I am as worldly as ever woman was. I think of nothing but how to establish myself, and have plenty of money. We want it so! Oh, I know you are very good to us —both my uncle and you; but mamma is extravagant, and I am extravagant, and naturally all that anybody thinks of is to have what is necessary and decent for us. We have to put up with it, but I hate what is necessary and decent. I should like to go in satin and lace to-day even if I knew I should be in rags to-morrow; and to think if you had not interfered that I might have blazed in diamonds, and gone to court,

and done everything I want to do! I could strangle you, Aunt Lydia, and mamma too!" Upon which Miss July (or Julée, which was how her name was pronounced) gave Mrs. Wynn a sudden kiss and took the cassock out of her hands. "If it wants any mending I will do it," she said; "it will just give me a little consolation for the moment. And you will have time to think and answer this question: Is it too late now?"

"July, dear, it hurts me to hear you talk so—you are not so wild as you take credit for being."

"I am not wild at all, Aunt Lydia," said the girl, appropriating Mrs. Wynn's implements, putting on her thimble, threading her needle, and discovering at one glance the little rent in the cassock which the old lady had been searching for in vain, "except with indignation to think what I have lost—if I have lost it. It is all very well to speak, but what is a poor girl to do? Yes, I know, to make just enough to live on by teaching, or something of that sort; but that is not what I want. I want to be well off. I am so extravagant, and so is mamma. We keep ourselves down, we don't spend money; but we hate it so! I would go through a great many disagreeables if I could only have enough to spend."

"And is Walter one of the disagreeables you would go through?"

"Well, no; I could put up with him very well. He is not at all unpleasant. I don't want him, but

I could do with him. Do you really think it is too late? Don't you think mamma might call upon Mrs. Methven and say how delighted we are; and just say to him, you know, in a playful way (mamma could manage that very well), 'We cannot hope to see you now in our little house, Lord Erradeen!' and then of course he would be piqued (for he's very generous), and say, 'Why?' And mamma would say, 'Oh, we are such poor little people, and you are now a great man.' Upon which, as sure as fate, he would be at the Cottage the same evening. And then!" July threw back her head, and expanded her brown eyes with a conscious power and sense of capability, as who should say—Then it would be in my own hands. — "Don't you think that's very good for a plan?" she added, subsiding quickly to the work, which she executed as one to the manner born.

"I don't think anything of it as a plan—and neither do you; and your mother would not do it, July," the old lady said.

"Ah," said July, throwing back her head, "there you have hit the blot, Aunt Lydia. Mamma wouldn't do it! She could, you know. When she likes she is the completest humbug!—but not always. And she has so many notions about propriety, and what is womanly, and so forth—just like you. Poor women have no business with such luxuries. I tell her we must be of our time, and all that sort of thing; but she won't see it. No, I am afraid that is just the

difficulty. It all depends on mamma—and mamma won't. Well, it is a little satisfaction to have had it all out with you. If you had not interfered, you two, and stopped the poor boy coming——"

At this juncture John threw open the door, and with a voice which he reserved for the great county ladies, announced "Mrs. Methven." John had heard the great news too.

"—Stopped the poor boy coming," July said. The words were but half out of her mouth when John opened the door, and it was next to impossible that the new visitor had not heard them. A burning blush covered the girl's face. She sprang to her feet with the cassock in her arms, and gazed at the new comer. Mrs. Methven for the first moment did not notice this third person. She came in with the content and self-absorption of one who has a great wonder to tell. The little world of Sloebury and all its incidents were as nothing to her. She went up to old Mrs. Wynn with a noiseless swiftness.

"I have come to tell you great news," she said.

"Let me look at you," said the old lady. "I have heard, and I scarcely could believe it. Then it is all true?"

"I am sorry I was not the first to tell you. I think such a thing must get into the air. Nobody went out from my house last night, and yet everybody knows. I saw even the people in the street looking at me as I came along. Mrs. Wynn, you always stood up for him;

I never said anything, but I know you did. I came first to you. Yes, it is all true."

The old lady had known it now for several hours, and had been gently excited, no more. Now her eyes filled with tears, she could not have told why.

"Dear boy! I hope God will bless him, and make him worthy and great," she said, clasping her old hands together. "He has always been a favourite with me."

"He is a favourite with everybody," said July. No one had noticed her presence, and she was not one that could remain unseen. "Everybody is glad; there is not one that doesn't wish him well."

Did she intend to strike that *coup* for herself which her mother was not to be trusted to make? Mrs. Wynn thought so with a great tremor, and interrupted her in a tone that for her was hurried and anxious.

"July speaks nothing but the truth, Mrs. Methven; there is nobody that does not like Walter; but I suppose I ought now to drop these familiarities and call him Lord Erradeen?"

"He will never wish his old friends to do that," said Mrs. Methven. She already smiled with a gracious glance and gesture: and the feeling that these old friends were almost too much privileged in being so near to him, and admitted to such signs of friendship, came into her mind; but she did not care to have July share her expansion. "Miss Herbert," she said, with a little bow, "is very good to speak so kindly. But everybody is kind. I did not know my boy was so

popular. Sunshine," she added, with a smile, "brings out all the flowers."

She had not sat down, and she evidently did not mean to do so while July remained. There was something grand in her upright carriage, in her air of superiority, which had never been apparent before. She had always been a woman, as Sloebury people said, who thought a great deal of herself; but no one had ever acknowledged her right to do so till now. On the other hand, July Herbert was well used to the cold shade. Her mother was Mrs. Wynn's niece, but she was none the less poor for that, and as July was not a girl to be easily put down, she was acquainted with every manner of polite snubbing known in the society of the place. This of standing till she should go was one with which she was perfectly familiar, and in many cases it afforded her pleasure to subject the operator to great personal inconvenience; but on the present occasion she was not disposed to exercise this power. She would have conciliated Walter's mother if she could have done so, and on a rapid survey of the situation she decided that the best plan was to yield.

"I must go and tell mamma the great news," she said. "I am sure she will never rest till she rushes to you with her congratulations; but I will tell her you are tired of congratulations already—for of course it is not a thing upon which there can be two opinions" July laid down the cassock as she spoke. "I have mended all there is to mend, Aunt Lydia; you need

not take any more trouble about it. Good-bye for the moment. You may be sure you will see one or other of us before night."

They watched her silently as she went out of the room. Mrs. Methven saying nothing till the door had closed, Mrs. Wynn with a deprecatory smile upon her face. She did not altogether approve of her grandniece. But neither was she willing to hand her over to blame. The old lady felt the snub July had received more than the girl herself did. She looked a little wistfully after her. She was half angry when as soon as July disappeared Mrs. Methven sank down upon a chair near her, huge billows of black silk rising about her, for she had put on her best gown. Mrs. Wynn thought that the mother, whose child, disapproved by the world, had been thus miraculously lifted above its censures, should have been all the more tolerant of the other who had met no such glorious fate. But she reflected that *they never see it*, which was her favourite expression of wonderment, yet explanation of everything. There were so many things that *they* ought to learn by; but they never saw it. It was thus she accounted with that shake of her head for all the errors of mankind.

Mrs. Methven for her part waited till even the very step of that objectionable Julia Herbert had died away. She had known by instinct that if *that* girl should appear she would be on the watch to make herself agreeable to Walter's mother. "As if he could ever have thought of her," she said to herself. Twenty-four

hours before Mrs. Methven would have been glad to think that Walter "thought of" any girl who was at all in his own position. She would have hailed it as a means of steadying him, and making him turn seriously to his life. But everything was now changed, and this interruption had been very disagreeable. She could scarcely turn to her old friend now with the effusion and emotion which had filled her when she came in. She held out her hand and grasped that of the old lady.

"I don't need to tell you what I am feeling," she said. "It is all like a tumultuous sea of wonder and thankfulness. I wanted it, for I was at my wits' end."

Mrs. Wynn was a little chilled too, but she took the younger woman's hand.

"You did not know what was coming," she said. "You wanted one thing, and Providence was preparing another."

"I don't know if that is how to state it; but at all events I was getting to feel that I could not bear it any longer, and trying for any way of setting things right: when the good came in this superlative way. I feel frightened when I think of it. After we knew last night I could do nothing but cry. It took all the strength from me. You would have thought it was bad news."

"I can understand that." The old lady relinquished the hand which she had been holding. "To be delivered from any anxieties you may have had in such a superlative way, as you say, is not the common lot—most of us have just to fight them out."

Mrs. Methven already felt herself far floated away from those that had to fight it out. The very words filled her heart with an elation beyond speech.

"And this morning," she said, "to wake and to feel it must be folly, and then to realise that it was true! One knows so well the other sort of waking when the shock and the pang come all over again. But to wake up to this extraordinary incredible well-being—one might say happiness!"

The tears of joy were in her eyes, and in those tears there is something so strange, so rare, that the soul experienced in life looks upon them almost with more awe than upon the familiar ones of grief which we see every day. The old lady melted, and her chill of feeling yielded to a tender warmth. Yet what a pity that They never see it! How much more perfect it would have been if the woman in her happiness had been softened and kind to all those whom nothing had happened to! Imperceptibly the old lady in her tolerant experience shook her gentle old head. Then she gave herself in full sympathy to hear all the wonderful details.

CHAPTER V.

The sentiments of the spectators in such a grand alteration of fortune may be interesting enough, and it is in general more easy to get at them than at those which fill the mind of the principal actor. In the present case it is better to say of the principal subject of the change, for Walter could not be said to be an actor at all. The emotions of the first evening it would indeed be impossible to describe. To come in from his small country-town society, to whom even he was so far inferior that every one of them had facilities of getting and spending money which he did not possess, and to sit down, all tremulous and guilty, feeling himself the poorest creature, opposite to the serious and important personage who came to tell him, with documents as solemn as himself, that this silly youth who had been throwing away his life for nothing, without even the swell of excitement to carry him on, had suddenly become, without deserving it, without doing anything to bring it about, an individual of the first importance—a peer, a proprietor, a great man. Walter could have sobbed as his mother did, had not pride

kept him back. When they sat down at table in the little dining-room there were two at least of the party who ate nothing, who sat and gazed at each other across the others with white faces and blazing eyes. Mr. Milnathort made a good dinner, and sat very watchful, making also his observations, full of curiosity and a certain half-professional interest. But Cousin Sophy was the only one who really got the good of this prodigious event. She asked if they might not have some champagne to celebrate the day. She was in high excitement but quite self-controlled, and enjoyed it thoroughly. She immediately began in her thoughts to talk of my young cousin Lord Erradeen. It was a delightful advancement which would bring her no advantage, and yet almost pleased her more than so much added on to her income; for Miss Merivale was not of any distinction in her parentage, and suddenly to find herself cousin to a lord went to her heart: it was a great benefit to the solitary lady fond of society, and very eager for a helping hand to aid her up the ascent. And it was she who kept the conversation going. She even flirted a little, quite becomingly, with the old lawyer, who felt her, it was evident, a relief from the high tension of the others, and was amused by the vivacious middle-aged lady, who for the moment had everything her own way. After dinner there was a great deal of explanation given, and a great many facts made clear, but it is to be doubted whether Walter knew very well what was

being said. He listened with an air of attention, but it was as if he were listening to some fairy tale. Something out of the *Arabian Nights* was being repeated before him. He was informed how the different branches of his family had died out one after another. "Captain Methven was aware that he was in the succession," the lawyer said; and Mrs. Methven cast a thought back, half-reproachful, half-approving upon her husband, who had been dead so long that his words and ways were like shadows to her, which she could but faintly recall. Would it have been better if he had told her? After pursuing this thought a long time she decided that it would not, that he had done wisely—yet felt a little visionary grudge and disappointment to think that he had been able to keep such a secret from her. No doubt it was all for the best. She might have distracted herself with hopes, and worn out her mind with waiting. It was doubtful if the support of knowing what was going to happen would really have done her any good; but yet it seemed a want of trust in her, it seemed even to put her in a partially ridiculous position now, as knowing nothing, not having even an idea of what was coming. But Walter did not share any of these goings back upon the past. He had scarcely known his father, nor was he old enough to have had such a secret confided to him for long after Captain Methven died. He thought nothing of that. He sat with an appearance of the deepest attention, but unaware of what was

being said, with a vague elation in his mind, something that seemed to buoy him up above the material earth. He could not bring himself down again. It was what he remembered to have felt when he was a child when some long-promised pleasure was coming—to-morrow. Even in that case hindrances might come in. It might rain to-morrow, or some similar calamity might occur. But rain could not affect this. He sat and listened and did not hear a word.

Next morning Walter awoke very early, before the wintry day had fully dawned. He opened his eyes upon a sort of paling and whitening of everything—a grey perception of the walls about him, and the lines of the window marked upon the paleness outside. What was it that made even these depressing facts exhilarate him and rouse an incipient delight in his mind, which for the moment he did not understand? Then he sat up suddenly in his bed. It was cold, it was dark. There was no assiduous servant to bring hot water or light his fire—everything was chilling and wretched; and he was not given to early rising. Ordinarily it was an affair of some trouble to get him roused, to see that he was in time for a train or for any early occupation. But this morning he found it impossible to lie still; an elasticity in him, an elation and buoyancy, which he almost felt, with a laugh, might float him up to the ceiling, like the mediums, made him jump up, as it were in self-defence. It buoyed him, it carried him as on floating pinions into

a limitless heaven. What was it? Who was he? The chill of the morning brought him a little to himself, and then he sat down in his shirt-sleeves and delivered himself up to the incredible, and laughed low and long, with a sense of the impossibility of it that brought tears to his eyes. He Lord Erradeen, Lord Anything! He a peer, a great man! he with lands and money and wealth of every sort, who last night had been pleased to win two sixpences! After the buoyancy and sensation of rising beyond the world altogether, which was a kind of physical consciousness of something great that had happened before he was awake, came this sense of the ludicrous, this incredulity and confused amusement. He dressed himself in this mood, laughing low from time to time, to himself, as if it were some game which was being played upon him, but of which he was in the secret, and not to be deceived, however artfully it might be managed. But when he was dressed and ready to go down-stairs—by which time daylight had fully struggled forth upon a wet and clammy world—he stopped himself short with a sudden reminder that to-day this curious practical joke was to extend its career and become known to the world. He laughed again, but then he grew grave, standing staring at the closed door of his bedroom, out of which he was about to issue—no longer a nobody—in a new character, to meet the remarks, the congratulations of his friends. He knew that the news would fly through the little town like lightning; that people

would stop each other in the streets and ask, "Have you heard it?—is it true?" and that throughout the whole place there would be a sort of revolution, a general change of positions, which would confuse the very world. He knew vaguely that whatever else might happen he would be uppermost. The people who had disapproved of him, and treated him *de haut en bas*, would find this to be impossible any longer. He would be in a position which is to be seen on the stage and in books more frequently than in common life—possessed of the power of making retribution, of punishing the wicked, and distributing to the good tokens of his favour. It is a thing we would all like to do, to avenge ourselves (within due Christian and social limits) on the persons who have despised us, and to reward those who have believed in us, showing the one how right they were, and the other how wrong they were, with a logic that should be undeniable. There is nobody who has ever endured a snub—and who has not?—who would not delight in doing this; but the most of us never get such a supreme gratification, and Walter was to have it. He was going to see everybody abashed and confounded who had ever treated him with contumely. Once more he felt that sensation of buoyancy and elation as if he were spurning earth with his foot and ready to soar into some sort of celestial sphere. And then once more he laughed to himself. Was it possible? could it be? would anybody believe it? He thought there would be an explosion of incredulous

laughter through all the streets; but then, when that was over, both friends and foes would be forced to believe it—as he himself was forced to believe.

With that he opened his door, and went down-stairs into the new world. He stumbled over the housemaid's pail, of course, but did not call forth any frown upon that functionary's freckled forehead as he would have done yesterday. On the contrary, she took away the pail, and begged his pardon with awe—being of course entirely blameless. He paused for a moment on the steps as he faced the raw morning air going out, and lo! the early baker, who was having a word with cook at the area over the rolls, turned towards him with a reverential look, and pulled off his cap. These were the first visible signs of Walter's greatness; they gave him a curious sort of conviction that after all the thing was true.

There was scarcely anybody about the Sloebury streets except bakers and milkmen at this hour. It was a leisurely little town, in which nothing particular was doing, no manufactures or business to demand early hours; and the good people did not get up early. Why should they? the day was long enough without that: so that Walter met no one in his early promenade. But before he got back there were symptoms that the particular baker who had taken off his cap had whispered the news to others of his fraternity, who, having no tie of human connection, such as supplying the family with rolls, to justify a salutation, only stared

at him with awe-stricken looks as he went past. He felt he was an object of interest even to the policeman going off duty, who being an old soldier, saluted with a certain grandeur as he tramped by. The young man took an aimless stroll through the half-awakened district. The roads were wet, the air raw: it was not a cheerful morning; damp and discouragement breathed in the air; the little streets looked squalid and featureless in shabby British poverty; lines of low, two-storied brick, all commonplace and monotonous. It was the sort of morning to make you think of the tediousness to which most people get up every day, supposing it to be life, and accepting it as such with the dull content which knows no better; a life made up of scrubbing out of kitchens and sweeping out of parlours, of taking down shutters and putting them up again; all sordid, petty, unbroken by an exhilarating event. But this was not what struck Walter as he floated along in his own wonderful atmosphere, seeing nothing, noting everything with the strange vision of excitement. Afterwards he recollected with extraordinary vividness a man who stood stretching his arms in shirt sleeves above his head for a long, soul-satisfying yawn, and remembered to have looked up at the shop-window within which he was standing, and read the name of ROBINSON in gilt letters. Robinson, yawning in his shirt-sleeves, against a background of groceries, pallid in the early light, remained with him like a picture for many a day.

When he got back the breakfast table was spread, and his mother taking her place at it. Mr. Milnathort had not gone away as he intended by the night train. He had remained in Mrs. Methven's spare room, surrounded by all the attentions and civilities that a household of women, regarding him with a sort of awe as a miraculous messenger or even creator of good fortune, could show to a bachelor gentleman, somewhat prim and old-fashioned in his habits and ways. It was his intention to leave Sloebury by the eleven o'clock train, and he had arranged that Walter should meet him in Edinburgh within a week, to be made acquainted with several family matters, in which, as the head of the house, it was necessary that he should be fully instructed. Neither Walter nor his mother paid very much attention to these arrangements, nor even remarked that the old lawyer spoke of them with great gravity. Mrs. Methven was busy making tea, and full of anxiety that Mr. Milnathort should breakfast well and largely, after what she had always understood to be the fashion of his country; and as for Walter, he was not in a state of mind to observe particularly any such indications of manner. Cousin Sophia was the only one who remarked the solemnity of his tone and aspect.

"One would suppose there was some ordeal to go through," she said in her vivacious way.

"A young gentleman who is taking up a large fortune and a great responsibility will have many

ordeals to go through, madam," Mr. Milnathort said in his deliberate tones: but he did not smile or take any other notice of her archness. It was settled accordingly, that after a few days for preparation and leave-taking, young Lord Erradeen should leave Sloebury. "And if I might advise, alone," Mr. Milnathort said, "the place is perhaps not just in a condition to receive ladies. I would think it wiser on the whole, madam, if you deferred your coming till his lordship there has settled everything for your reception."

"*My* coming?" said Mrs. Methven. The last twelve hours had made an extraordinary difference in her feelings and faith; but still she had not forgotten what had gone before, nor the controversies and struggles of the past. "We must leave all that for after consideration," she said.

Walter was about to speak impulsively, but old Milnathort stopped him with a skilful interruption—

"It will perhaps be the wisest way," he said; "there will be many things to arrange. When Lord Erradeen has visited the property, and understands everything about it, then he will be able to——"

Walter heard the name at first with easy unconsciousness: then it suddenly blazed forth upon him as his own name. His mother at the other end of the table felt the thrill of the same sensation. Their eyes met; and all the wonder of this strange new life suddenly gleamed upon them with double force. It is true that the whole condition of their minds was

affected by this revelation, that there was nothing about them that was not full of it, and that they were actually at this moment discussing the business connected with it. Still it all came to life now as at the first moment at the sound of this name, Lord Erradeen! Walter could not help laughing to himself over his coffee.

"I can't tell who you mean," he said. "You must wait a little until I realise what Walter Methven has got to do with it."

Mrs. Methven thought that this was making too much of the change. She already wished to believe, or at least to persuade Mr. Milnathort to believe, that she was not so very much surprised after all.

"Lord Erradeen," she said, "is too much amused at present with having got a new name to take the change very seriously."

"He will soon learn the difference, madam," said Mr. Milnathort. "Property is a thing that has always to be taken seriously: and of all property the Erradeen lands. There are many things connected with them that he will have to set his face to in a way that will be far from amusing."

The old lawyer had a very grave countenance—perhaps it was because he was a Scotchman. He worked through his breakfast with a steady routine that filled the ladies with respect. First fish, then kidneys, then a leg of the partridge that had been left from dinner last night; finally he looked about the table with an

evident sense of something wanting, and though he declared that it was of no consequence, avowed at last, with some shyness, that it was the marmalade for which he was looking: and there was none in the house! Mr. Milnathort was full of excuses for having made such a suggestion. It was just a Scotch fashion he declared; it was of no consequence. Mrs. Methven, who held an unconscious conviction that it was somehow owing to him that Walter had become Lord Erradeen, was made quite unhappy by the omission.

"I shall know better another time," she said regretfully. They were all still under the impression more or less that it was his doing. He was not a mere agent to them, but the god, out of the machinery, who had turned darkness into light. He justified this opinion still more fully before he went away, putting into Walter's hand a cheque-book from a London bank, into which a sum of money which seemed to the inexperienced young man inexhaustible, had been paid to his credit. The old gentleman on his side seemed half-embarrassed, half-impatient after a while by the attention shown him. He resisted when Walter declared his intention of going to the railway to see him off.

"That is just a reversal of our positions," he said.

At this Mrs. Methven became a little anxious, fearing that perhaps Walter's simplicity might be going too far. She gave him a word of warning when the cab drove up for Mr. Milnathort's bag. It was not a very

large one, and Walter was quite equal to the condescension of carrying it to the station if his mother had not taken that precaution. She could not make up her mind that he was able to manage for himself.

"You must remember that after all he is only your man of business," she said, notwithstanding all the worship she had herself been paying to this emissary of fortune. It was a relief to shake hands with him, to see him drive away from the door, leaving behind him such an amazing, such an incalculable change. Somehow it was more easy to realise it when he was no longer there. And this was what Walter felt when he walked away from the railway, having seen with great satisfaction the grizzled head of the old Scotsman nod at him from a window of the departing train. The messenger was gone; the thing which he had brought with him, did that remain? Was it conceivable that it was now fixed and certain not to be affected by anything that could be done or said? Walter walked steadily enough along the pavement, but he did not think he was doing so. The world around him swam in his eyes once more. He could not make sure that he was walking on solid ground, or mounting up into the air. How different it was from the way in which he had come forth yesterday, idle, half-guilty, angry with himself and everybody, yet knowing very well what to do, turning with habitual feet into the way where all the other idlers congregated, knowing who he should meet and what would happen. He was

separated from all that as if by an ocean. He had no longer anything to do with these foolish loungers. His mother had told him a thousand times in often varied tones that they were not companions for him; to-day he recognised the fact with a certain disgust. He felt it more strongly still when he suddenly came across Captain Underwood coming up eagerly with outstretched hands.

"I hope I am the first to congratulate you, Lord Erradeen," he said. "Now you will know why I asked you yesterday, Was there any news——"

"Now I shall know? I don't a bit; what do you mean? Do you mean me to believe that *you* had any hand in it?" Walter cried, with a tone of mingled incredulity and disdain.

"No hand in it, unless I had helped to put the last poor dear lord out of the way. I could scarcely have had that; but if you mean did I know about it, I certainly did, as you must if you had been a little more in the world."

"Why didn't you tell me then?" said Walter. He added somewhat hotly, with something of the sublime assumption of youth: "Waiting for a man to die would never have suited me. I much prefer to have been, as you say, out of the world——"

"Oh, Lord! I didn't mean to offend you," said the captain. "Don't get on a high horse. Of course, if you'd known your Debrett as I do, you would have seen the thing plain enough. However, we needn't quarrel

about it. I have always said you were my pupil, and I hope I have put you up to a few things that will be of use on your entry into society."

"Have you?" said Walter. He could not think how he had ever for a moment put up with this underbred person. Underwood stood before him with a sort of jaunty rendering of the appeal with which grooms and people about the stable remind a young man of what in his boyish days they have done for him—an appeal which has its natural issue in a sovereign. But he could not give Underwood a sovereign, and it was perhaps just a little ungenerous to turn in the first moment of his prosperity from a man who, from whatever purpose, had been serviceable to him in his poverty. He said, with an attempt to be more friendly: "I know, Underwood, you have been very kind."

"Oh, by Jove! kind isn't the word. I knew you'd want a bit of training; the best thoroughbred that ever stepped wants that; and if I can be of any use to you in the future, I will. I knew old Erradeen; I've known all about the family for generations. There are a great many curious things about it, but I think I can help you through them," said the captain with a mixture of anxiety and swagger. There had always been something of this same mixture about him, but Walter had never been fully conscious what it was till now.

"Thank you," he said; "perhaps it will be better to let that develop itself in a natural way. I am going to

Scotland in a week, and then I shall have it at first hand."

"Then I can tell you beforehand you will find a great many things you won't like," said Underwood, abruptly. "It is not for nothing that a family gets up such a reputation. I know two or three of your places. Mulmorrel, and the shooting-box on Loch Etive, and that mysterious old place at Kinloch-houran. I have been at every one of them. It was not everybody, I can tell you, that old Erradeen would have taken to that place. Why, there is a mystery at every corner. There is——"

Walter held up his hand to stay this torrent. He coloured high with a curious sentiment of proprietorship and the shrinking of pride from hearing that which was his discussed by strangers. He scarcely knew the names of them, and their histories not at all. He put up his hand: "I would rather find out the mysteries for myself," he said.

"Oh," cried Underwood, "if you are standing on your dignity, my lord, as you like, for that matter. I am not one to thrust my company upon any man if he doesn't like it. I have stood your friend, and I would again; but as for forcing myself upon you now that you've come to your kingdom——"

"Underwood," cried the other, touched in the tenderest point, "if you dare to insinuate that this has changed me, I desire never to speak to you again. But it is only, I suppose, one of the figures of speech

that people use when they are angry. I am not such a cad as you make me out. Whether my name is Methven or Erradeen—I don't seem to know very well which it is——"

"It is both," the other cried with a great laugh, and they shook hands, engaging to dine together at the hotel that evening. Underwood, who was knowing in such matters, was to order the dinner, and two or three of "the old set," were to be invited. It would be a farewell to his former comrades, as Walter intended; and with a curious recurrence of his first elation he charged his representative to spare no expense. There was something intoxicating and strange in the very phrase.

As he left Underwood and proceeded along the High Street, where, if he had not waved his hand to them in passing with an air of haste and pre-occupation, at least every second person he met would have stopped him to wish him joy, he suddenly encountered July Herbert. She was going home from the vicarage, out of which his mother had politely driven her; and it seemed the most wonderful luck to July to get him to herself, thus wholly unprotected, and with nobody even to see what she was after. She went up to him, not with Underwood's eagerness, but with a pretty frank pleasure in her face.

"I have heard a fairy tale," she said, "and it is true——"

"I suppose you mean about me," said Walter. "Yes,

I am afraid it is true. I don't exactly know who I am at present."

"Afraid!" cried July. "Ah, you know you don't mean that. At all events, you are no longer just the old Walter whom we have known all our lives."

There was another girl with her whom Walter knew but slightly, but who justified the plural pronoun.

"On the contrary, I was going to say, when you interrupted me——"

"I am so sorry I interrupted you."

"That though I did not know who I was in the face of the world, I was always the old Walter, &c. A man, I believe, can never lose his Christian name."

"Nor a woman either," said July. "That is the only thing that cannot be taken from us. We are supposed, you know, rather to like the loss of the other one."

"I have heard so," said Walter, who was not unaccustomed to this sort of fencing. "But I suppose it is not true."

"Oh," said July, "if it were for the same reason that makes you change your name, I should not mind. But there is no peerage in our family that I know of, and I should not have any chance if there were, alas! Good-bye, Lord Erradeen. It is a lovely name! And may I always speak to you when I meet you, though you are such a grand personage? We do not hope to see you at the Cottage now, but mamma will like to know that you still recognise an old friend."

"I shall come and ask Mrs. Herbert what she thinks of it all," Walter said.

July's brown eyes flashed out with triumph as she laughed and waved her hand to him. She said—

"It will be too great an honour," and curtseyed; then laughed again as she went on, casting a glance at him over her shoulder.

He laughed too; he was young, and he was gratified even by this undisguised provocation, though he could not help saying to himself, with a slight beat of his heart, how near he was to falling in love with that girl! What a good thing it was that he did not—*now!*

As for July, she looked at him with a certain ferocity, as if she would have devoured him. To think of all that boy had it in his power to give if he pleased, and to think how little a poor girl could do!

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Methven was conscious of a new revival of the old displeasure when Walter informed her of the engagement he had formed for the evening. She was utterly disappointed. She had thought that the great and beneficial shock of this new life would turn his character altogether, and convert him into that domestic sovereign, that object of constant reference, criticism, and devotion which every woman would have every man be. It was a wonderful mortification and enlightenment to find that without even the interval of a single evening devoted to the consideration of his new and marvellous prospects, and that talking over which is one of the sweetest parts of a great and happy event, he should return—to what?—to wallowing in the mire, as the Scripture says, to his old billiard-room acquaintances, the idlers and undesirable persons with whom he had formed associations. Could there be anything more unsuitable than Lord Erradeen in the midst of such a party, with Underwood, and perhaps worse than Underwood. It wounded her pride and roused her temper, and, in spite of all her efforts, it was with a lowering

brow that she saw him go away. Afterwards, indeed, when she thought of it, as she did for hours together, while cousin Sophia talked, and she languidly replied, maintaining a conversation from the lips outward, so poor a substitute for the evening's talking over and happy consultation she had dreamed of—Mrs. Methven was more just to her son. She tried always to be just, poor lady. She placed before herself all the reasons for his conduct. That he should entertain the men who, much against her wish and his own good, yet in their way had been kind to and entertained him, was natural. But to do it this first evening was hard, and she could not easily accept her disappointment. Afterwards she reminded herself with a certain stern philosophy that because Walter had owned a touch of natural emotion, and had drawn near to her and confessed himself in the wrong, that was no reason why his character should be changed in a moment. There were numbers of men who on occasion felt and lamented their misdoing, yet went on again in the same way. He had been no doubt startled, as some are by calamity, by the more extraordinary shock of this good fortune; but why should he for that abandon all the tastes and occupations of his former life? It was she, she said to herself, with some bitterness, who was a fool. The fact was that Walter meant no harm at all, and that it was merely the first impulse of a half-scornful liberality, impatience of the old associations, which he had tacitly acknowledged were not fit for him, that led him back to his former

companions. He felt afterwards that it would have been in better taste had he postponed this for a night. But he was very impatient and eager to shake himself free of them, and enter upon his new career.

Something of the same disappointed and disapproving sentiment filled Mrs. Methven's mind when she heard of his visit to the Cottage. She knew no reason why he should take a special leave of July Herbert; if he knew himself a reason, which he did not disclose, that was another matter. Thoughts like this embittered the preparations for his departure, which otherwise would have been so agreeable. She had to see after many things which a young man of more wealth, or more independent habits, would have done for himself—his linen, his portmanteau, most of the things he wanted, except the tailor part of the business; but it was not until the last evening that there was any of the confidential consultation, for which her heart had longed. Even on that last day Walter had been very little indoors. He had been busy with a hundred trifles, and she had begun to make up her mind to his going away without a word said as to their future relations, as to whether he meant his mother to share any of the advantages of his new position, or to drop her at Sloebury as something done with, which he did not care to burden himself with, any more than the other circumstances of his past career. She did so little justice to the real generosity of her son's temper in the closeness of her contest with him, and

the heat of personal feeling, that she had begun to make up her mind to this, with what pain and bitterness it is unnecessary to say.

She had even begun to make excuses for her own desertion in the tumult of endless thought upon this one subject which possessed her. She would be just; after all, was it not better perhaps that she should be left in the little house which was her independent home, for which she owed nothing to any one? If any unnecessary sense of gratitude made him offer her reluctantly a share in his new life, that would be humiliation indeed. If, as was apparent, her society, her advice, her love were nothing to him, was it not far better that both should recognise the situation, and view things in their true light? This the proud woman had made up her mind to, with what depth of wounded tenderness and embittered affection who could say? She had packed for him with her own hands, for all his permanent arrangements were to be made after he had left Sloebury, and to change her household in consequence of an alteration of fortune which, according to all appearances, would not concern her, was, she had proudly decided, quite out of the question. She packed for him as in the days when he was going to school, when he was a boy, and liked everything better that had been done by his mother. A woman may be pardoned for feeling such a difference with a passionate soreness and sense of downfall. In those days how she had thought of the time when he would

be grown up, when he would understand all her difficulties and share all her cares, and in his own advancement make her triumphant and happy! God forgive me, she said to herself, now he has got advancement far above my hopes, and I am making myself wretched thinking of myself. She stopped and cried a little over his new linen. No, he was right; if it must be allowed that they did not "get on," it was indeed far better in the long run that there should be no false sentiment, no keeping up of an untenable position. Thank God she required nothing; she had enough; she wanted neither luxury nor grandeur, and her home, her natural place was here, where she had lived so many years, where she could disarm all comment upon Walter's neglect of her, by saying that she preferred the place where she had lived so long, and where she had so many friends. Why, indeed, should she change her home at her time of life? No doubt he would come back some time and see her; but after all why should her life be unsettled because his was changed? It was he who showed true sense in his way of judging the matter, she said to herself with a smile, through the hastily dried and momentary tears.

Walter came in when the packing was just about concluded. He came half way up the stairs and called "Mother, where are you?" as he had often done when he was a boy and wanted her at every turn, but as he never did now. This touched and weakened her

again in her steady resolution to let him see no repining in her. "Are you packing for me?" he called out again; "what a shame while I have been idling! But come down, mother, please, and leave that. You forget we have everything to settle yet."

"What is there to settle?" she said, with a certain sharpness of tone which she could not quite suppress, coming out upon the landing. The maids who were going to bed, and who heard all this, thought it was beautiful to hear his lordship speaking like that, quite natural to his mother; but that missus was that hard it was no wonder if they didn't get on; and Cousin Sophia from her virgin retirement, where she sat in her dressing-gown reading a French novel, and very much alive to every sound, commented in her own mind, closing her book, in the same sense. "Now she will just go and hold him at arm's length while the boy's heart is melting, and then break her own," Miss Merivale said to herself. Thus everybody was against her and in favour of the fortunate young fellow who had been supping on homage and flattery, and now came in easy and careless to make everything straight at the last moment. Mrs. Methven on her side was very tired, and tremulous with the exertion of packing. It would have been impossible for her to banish that tone out of her voice. She stood in the subdued light upon the stairs looking down upon him, leaning on the banister to support herself; while he, with all the light from below upon his face, ruddy with the night air, and the

applauses, and his own high well-being, looked up gaily at her. He had shaken off all his old irritability in the confidence of happiness and good fortune that had taken possession of him. After a moment he came springing up the stairs three at a time.

"You look tired, mother, while I have been wasting my time. Come down, and let us have our talk. I'll do all the rest to-morrow," he said, throwing his arm round her and leading her down-stairs. He brought her some wine first of all and a footstool, and threw himself into the easy task of making her comfortable. "Now," he said, "let's talk it all over," drawing a chair to her side.

All this was quite new upon Walter's part—or rather quite old, belonging to an age which had long ago gone.

"Isn't it rather late for that?" she said, with a faint smile.

"Yes, and I am ashamed of myself; but, unfortunately, you are so used to that. We must settle, however, mother. I am to go first of all to Kinloch-houran, which Milnathort says is not a place for you. Indeed, I hear——" here he paused a little as if he would have named his authority, and continued, "that it is a ruinous sort of place; and why I should go there, I don't know."

"Where did you hear?" she said, with quick suspicion.

"Well, mother, I would rather not have mentioned

his name; but if you wish to know, from Underwood. I know you are prejudiced against him. Yes, it is prejudice, though I don't wonder at it. I care nothing for the fellow; but still it comes out, which is rather strange, that he knows these places, and a good deal about the Erradeens."

"Is that, then," cried the mother quickly, "the reason of his being here?"

"He never said so, nor have I asked him," answered Walter, with something of his old sullenness; but then he added—"The same thought has crossed my own mind, mother, and I shouldn't wonder if it were so."

"Walter," she said, "a man like that can have but one motive—the desire to aggrandise himself. For heaven's sake, don't have anything to do with him; don't let him get an influence over you."

"You must have a very poor opinion of me, mother,' he said, in an aggrieved tone.

She looked at him with a curious gaze, silenced, as it seemed. She loved him more than anything in the world, and thought of him above everything; and yet perhaps in that wrath with those we love which works like madness in the brain, it was true what he said—that she had a poor opinion of him. Extremes meet, as the proverb says. However, this was a mystery too deep for Walter to enter into.

"Don't let us waste words about Underwood," he said. "I care nothing for the fellow; he is vulgar and presuming—as you always said."

Partly, no doubt, this avowal was made with the intention of pleasing his mother; at the same time it proved the great moral effect of promotion in rank. Lord Erradeen saw with the utmost distinctness what Walter Methven had only glimpsed by intervals. And it is impossible to describe how this speech pleased Mrs. Methven. Her tired eyes began to shine, her heart to return to its brighter hopes.

"The thing is, what arrangements you wish me to make," said Walter. "What are you going to do? I hear Mulmorrel is a handsome house, but it's November, and naturally it is colder in the north. Do you think you would care to go there now, or wait till the weather is better? It may want furnishing, for anything I know; and it appears we've got a little house in town."

"Walter," she said, in a voice which was husky and tremulous, "before you enter upon all this—you must first think, my dear. Are you sure it will be for your comfort to have me with you at all? Wouldn't you rather be free, and make your own arrangements, and leave me—as I am?"

"MOTHER?" the young man cried. He got up suddenly from where he was sitting beside her, and pushed away his chair, and stood facing her, with a sudden paleness and fiery eyes that seemed to dazzle her. He had almost kicked her footstool out of his way in his excitement and wounded feeling. "Do you mean to say you want to have nothing to do with me?" he said.

"Oh! my boy, you could not think so. I thought that was what—you meant. I wish only what is for your good."

"Would it be for my good to be an unnatural cad?" said the young man, with rising indignation—"a heartless, ill-conditioned whelp, with no sense and no feeling? Oh, mother! mother! what a poor opinion you must have of me!" he cried; and so stung was he with this blow that sudden tears sprang to his eyes. "All because I'm a fool and put everything off to the last moment," he added, in a sort of undertone, as if explaining it to himself. "But I'm not a beast for all that," he said, fiercely.

She made him no reply, but sat and gazed at him with a remorse and compunction, which, painful sentiments as they are, were to her sweet as the dews from heaven. Yes, it appeared that through all her passionate and absorbing tenderness she had had a poor opinion of him. She had done him injustice. The conviction was like a new birth. That he should be Lord Erradeen was nothing in comparison of being, as he thus proved himself, good and true, open to the influences of affection and nature. She could not speak, but her eyes were full of a thousand things; they asked him mutely to forgive her. They repented, and were abashed and rejoiced all in one glance. The young man who had not been nearly so heartless as she feared, was now not nearly so noble as she thought: but he was greatly touched by the crisis, and by the

suggestion of many a miserable hour which was in her involuntary sin against him and in her penitence. He came back again and sat close by her, and kissed her tremulously.

"I have been a cad," he said. "I don't wonder you lost all faith in me, mother."

"Not that, not that," she said faintly; and then there was a moment of exquisite silence, in which, without a word, everything was atoned for, and pardon asked and given.

And then began perhaps the happiest hour of Mrs. Methven's life, in which they talked over everything and decided what was to be done. Not to give up the house in Sloebury at present, nor indeed to do anything at present, save wait till he had made his expedition into Scotland and seen his new property, and brought her full particulars. After he had investigated everything and knew exactly the capabilities of the house, and the condition in which it was, and all the necessities and expediencies, they would then decide as to the best thing to be done; whether to go there, though at the worst time of the year, or to go to London, which was an idea that pleased Walter but alarmed his mother. Mrs. Methven did her best to remember what were the duties of a great landed proprietor and to bring them home to her son.

"You ought to spend Christmas at your own place," she said. "There will be charities and hospitalities and the poor people to look after."

She did not know Scotland, nor did she know very well what it was to be a great country magnate. She had been but a poor officer's daughter herself, and had married another officer, and been beaten about from place to place before she settled down on her small income at Sloebury. She had not much more experience than Walter himself had in this respect; indeed, if the truth must be told, both of them drew their chief information from novels, those much-abused sources of information, in which the life of rural potentates is a favourite subject, and not always described with much knowledge. Walter gravely consented to all this, with a conscientious desire to do what was right: but he thought the place would most likely be gloomy for his mother in winter, and that hospitalities would naturally be uncalled for so soon after the death of the old lord.

"What I would advise would be Park Lane," he said, with a judicial tone. "Milnathort said that it was quite a small house."

"What is a small house in Park Lane would look a palace at Sloebury," Mrs. Methven said: "and you must not begin on an extravagant footing, my dear."

"You will let us begin comfortably, I hope," he said; "and I must look for a nice carriage for you, mother."

Walter felt disposed to laugh as he said the words, but carried them off with an air of easy indifference as if it were the most natural thing in the world: while his mother on her side could have cried for pleasure and tenderness.

"You must not mind me, Walter; we must think what is best for yourself," she said, as proud and pleased as if she had twenty carriages.

"Nothing of the sort," he said. "We are going to be comfortable, and you must have everything that is right first of all."

What an hour it was! now and then there will be given to one individual out of a class a full measure of recompense heaped and overflowing, out of which the rest may get a sympathetic pleasure though they do not enjoy it in their own persons. Mrs. Methven had never imagined that this would come to her, but lo! in a moment it was pouring upon her in floods of consolation. So absorbing was this happy consultation that it was only when her eyes suddenly caught the clock on the mantelpiece, and saw that the hands were marking a quarter to two! that Mrs. Methven startled awoke out of her bliss.

"My poor boy! that I should keep you up to this hour talking, and a long journey before you to-morrow!" she cried.

She hustled him up to his room after this, talking and resisting gaily to the very door. He was happy too with that sense of happiness conferred, which is always sweet, and especially to youth in the delightful, easy sense of power and beneficence. When he thought of it he was a little remorseful, to think that he had possessed the power so long and never exercised it, for Walter was generous enough to be aware that the house

in Park Lane and the carriage were not the occasions of his mother's blessedness. "Poor mother," he said to himself softly. He might have made her a great deal more happy if he had chosen before these fine things were dreamt of. But Mrs. Methven remembered that no more. She begged pardon of God on her knees for misjudging her boy, and for once in her life was profoundly, undoubtingly happy, with a perfection and fulness of content which perhaps could only come after long experience of the reverse. After such a moment a human creature, if possible, should die, so as to taste nothing less sweet: for the less sweet, to be sure, must come back if life goes on, and at that moment there was not a cloud or a suggestion of darkness upon the firmament. She grudged falling asleep, though she was very tired, and so losing this beautiful hour; but nature is wilful and will seldom abdicate the night for joy, whatever she may do for grief.

Next morning she went to the station with him to see him away. Impossible to describe the devotion of all the officials to Lord Erradeen's comfort on his journey. The station-master kindly came to superintend this august departure, and the porters ran about contending for his luggage with an excitement which made, at least, one old gentleman threaten to write to the *Times*. There was nothing but "my lord" and "his lordship" to be heard all over the station; and so many persons came to bid him good-bye and see the

last of him, as they said, that the platform was quite inconveniently crowded. Among these, of course, was Captain Underwood, whose fervent—"God bless you, my boy"—drowned all other greetings. He had, however, a disappointed look—as if he had failed in some object. Mrs. Methven, whose faculties were all sharpened by her position, and who felt herself able to exercise a toleration which, in former circumstances, would have been impossible to her, permitted him to overtake her as she left the place, and acknowledged his greeting with more cordiality, or, at least, with a less forbidding civility than usual. And then a wonderful sight was seen in Sloebury. This *bête noir* of the feminine world, this man whom every lady frowned upon, was seen walking along the High Street, side by side, in earnest conversation with one of the women who had been most unfavourable to him. Was she listening to an explanation, a justification, an account of himself, such as he had not yet given, to satisfy the requirements of the respectability of Sloebury? To tell the truth, Mrs. Methven now cared very little for any such explanation. She did not remember, as she ought to have done, that other women's sons might be in danger from this suspicious person, though her own was now delivered out of his power. But she was very curious to know what anybody could tell her of Walter's new possessions, and of the family which it was rather humiliating to know so little about. It was she, indeed, who had begun the conversation after his

first remark upon Walter's departure and the loss which would result to Sloebury.

"You know something about the Erradeens, my son tells me," she said almost graciously.

"Something! I know about as much as most people. I knew he was the heir, which few, except yourselves, did," the captain said. He cast a keen glance at her when he said, "except yourselves."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Methven, "that is scarcely correct, for Walter did not know, and I had forgotten. I had, indeed, lost sight of my husband's family and the succession seemed so far off."

It was thus that she veiled her ignorance and endeavoured to make it appear that indifference on her part, and a wise desire to keep Walter's mind unaffected by such a dazzling possibility, had been her guiding influence. She spoke with such modest gravity that Captain Underwood, not used to delusion under that form, was tempted into a sort of belief. He looked at her curiously, but her veil was down, and her artifice, if it was an artifice, was of a kind more delicate than any to which he was accustomed.

"Well!" he said, "then it was not such a surprise to you as people thought? Sloebury has talked of nothing else, I need not tell you, for several days; and everybody was of opinion that it burst upon you like a thunderbolt."

"Upon my son, yes," Mrs. Methven said with a smile.

He looked at her again, and she had the satisfaction

of perceiving that this experienced man of the world was taken in.

"Well, then," he said, "you will join with me in wishing him well out of it: you know all the stories that are about."

"I have never been at Mulmorrel—my husband's chances in his own lifetime were very small, you know."

"It isn't Mulmorrel, it is that little ruined place where something uncanny is always said to go on—oh, *I* don't know what it is; nobody does but the reigning sovereign himself, and some hangers-on, I suppose. I have been there. I've seen the mysterious light, you know. Nobody can ever tell what window it shows at, or if it is any window at all. I was once with the late man—the late lord, he who died the other day—when it came out suddenly. We were shooting wildfowl, and his gun fell out of his hands. I never saw a man in such a funk. We were a bit late, and twilight had come on before we knew."

"So then you actually saw something of it yourself?" Mrs. Methven said. She had not the remotest idea what this was, but if she could find out something by any means she was eager enough to take advantage of it.

"No more than that; but I can tell you this: Erradeen was not seen again for twenty-four hours. Whether it was a call to him or what it was I can't undertake to say. He never would stand any questioning about it. He was a good fellow enough, but

he never would put up with anything on that point. So I can only wish Walter well through it, Mrs. Methven. In my opinion he should have had some one with him; for he is young, and, I dare say, he is fanciful."

"My son, Lord Errradeen," said Mrs. Methven with dignity, "is man enough, I hope, to meet an emergency. Perhaps you think him younger than he is." She propounded this delicately as, perhaps, a sort of excuse for the presumption of the Christian name.

Underwood grew very red: he was disappointed and irritable. "Oh, of course you know best," he said. "As for my Lord Erradeen (I am sure I beg your pardon for forgetting his dignity), I dare say he is quite old enough to take care of himself—at least, we'll hope so; but a business of that kind will upset the steadiest brain, you know. Old Erradeen had not a bad spirit of his own, and *he* funked it. I confess I feel a little anxious for your boy; he's a nice fellow, but he's nervous. I was in a dozen minds to go up with him to stand by him; but, perhaps, it is better not, for the best motives get misconstrued in this world. I can only wish him well out of it," Captain Underwood said, taking off his hat, and making her a fine bow as he stalked away.

It is needless to say that this mysterious intimation of danger planted daggers in Mrs. Methven's heart. She stopped aghast: and for the moment the idea of running back to the station, and signalling that the

train was to be stopped came into her mind. Ridiculous folly! Wish him well out of it? What, out of his great fortune, his peerage, his elevation in the world? Mrs. Methven smiled indignantly, and thought of the strange manifestations under which envy shows itself. But she went home somewhat pale, and could not dismiss it from her mind as she wished to do. Well out of it! And there were moments when, she remembered, she had surprised a very serious look on the countenance of Mr. Milnathort. Was Walter going unwarned, in the elation and happy confidence of his heart, into some danger unknown and unforeseen? This took her confidence away from her, and made her nervous and anxious. But after all, what folly it must be: something uncanny and a mysterious light! These were stories for Christmas, to bring a laugh or a shiver from idle circles round the fire. To imagine that they could effect anything in real life was a kind of madness; an old-fashioned, exploded superstition. It was too ridiculous to be worthy a thought.

CHAPTER VII.

WALTER arrived in Edinburgh on a wintry morning white and chill. A sort of woolly shroud wrapped all the fine features of the landscape. He thought the dingy turrets of the Calton Jail were the Castle, and was much disappointed, as was natural. Arthur's Seat and the Crags were as entirely invisible as if they had been a hundred miles away, and the cold crept into his very bones after his night's journey, although it had been made luxuriously, in a way very different from his former journeyings. Also it struck him as strange and uncomfortable that nobody was aware of the change in his position, and that even the railway porter, to whom he gave a shilling (as a commoner he would have been contented with sixpence), only called him "Sir," and could not perceive that it would have been appropriate to say my lord. He went to an hotel, as it was so early, and found only a dingy little room to repose himself in, the more important part of the house being still in the hands of the housemaids. And when he gave his name as Lord Erradeen, the attendants stared at him with a sort of suspicion. They

looked at his baggage curiously, and evidently asked each other if it was possible he could be what he claimed to be. Walter had a half-consciousness of being an impostor, and trying to take these surprised people in. He thawed, however, as he eat his breakfast, and the mist began to rise, revealing the outline of the Old Town. He had never been in Edinburgh before; he had rarely been anywhere before. It was all new to him, even the sense of living in an inn. There was a curious freedom about it, and independence of all restraint, which pleased him. But it was very strange to be absolutely unknown, to meet the gaze of faces he had never seen before, and to be obliged always to explain who he was. It was clear that a servant was a thing quite necessary to a man who called himself by a title, a servant not so much to attend upon him as to answer for him, and be a sort of guarantee to the world. Now that he was here in Edinburgh, he was not quite sure what to do with himself. It was too early to do anything. He could not disturb old Milnathort at such an hour. He must let the old man get to his office and read his letters before he could descend upon him. So that on the whole Walter, though sustained by the excitement of his new position, was altogether chilled and not at all comfortable, feeling those early hours of grim daylight hang very heavily on his hands. He went out after he had refreshed and dressed—and strolled about the fine but foreign street. It looked quite foreign to his

inexperienced eyes. The Castle soared vaguely through the grey mist; the irregular line of roofs and spires crowning the ridge threw itself up vaguely against a darker grey behind. There was a river of mist between him and that ridge, running deep in the hollow, underneath the nearer bank, which was tufted with spectral bushes and trees, and with still more spectral white statues glimmering through. On the other side of the street, more cheerful and apparent, were the jewellers' shops full of glistening pebbles and national ornaments. Everybody knows that it is not these shops alone, but others of every luxurious kind, that form the glory of Prince's Street. But Walter was a stranger and foreigner; and in the morning mists the shining store of cairngorms was the most cheerful sight that met his eye.

Mr. Milnathort's office was in a handsome square, with a garden in the centre of it, and another statue holding possession of the garden. For the first time since he left home, Walter felt a little thrill of his new importance when he beheld the respectful curiosity produced among the clerks by the statement of his name. They asked his lordship to step in with an evident sensation. And for Walter himself to look into that office where his mother had so strongly desired that he should find a place, had the most curious effect. He felt for the moment as if he were one of the serious young men peeping from beyond the wooden railing that inclosed the office, at the fortunate youth whose

circumstances were no different from their own. He did not realise at that moment the unfailing human complacency which would have come to his aid in such circumstances, and persuaded him that the gifts of fortune had nothing to do with real superiority. He thought of the possible reflections upon himself of the other young fellows in their lowly estate as if he had himself been making them. He was sorry for them all, for the contrast they must draw, and the strange sense of human inequality that they must feel. He was no better than they were—who could tell? perhaps not half as good. He felt that to feel this was a due tribute from Lord Erradeen in his good fortune to those who might have been Walter Methven's fellow-clerks, but who had never had any chance of being Lord Erradeen. And then he thought what a good thing it was that he had never written that letter to Mr. Milnathort, offering himself for a desk in the office. He had felt really guilty on the subject at the time. He had felt that it was miserable of him to neglect the occasion thus put before him of gaining a livelihood. Self-reproach, real and unmistakable, had been in his mind; and yet what a good thing he had not done it: and how little one knows what is going to happen! These were very ordinary reflections, not showing much depth; but it must be recollected that Walter was still in a sort of primary state of feeling, and had not had time to reach a profounder level.

Mr. Milnathort made haste to receive him, coming out of his own room on purpose, and giving him the warmest welcome.

"I might have thought you would come by the night train. You are not old enough to dislike night travelling as I do; but I will take it ill, and so will my sister, if you stay in an hotel, and your room ready for you in our little place. I think you will be more comfortable with us, though we have no grandeur to surround you with. My sister has a great wish to make your acquaintance, my Lord Erradeen. She has just a wonderful acquaintance with the family, and it was more through her than any one that I knew just where to put my hand upon you, when the time came."

"I did not like to disturb you so early," Walter said.

"Well, perhaps there is something in that. We are not very early birds: and as a matter of fact, Alison did not expect you till about seven o'clock at night. And here am I in the midst of my day's work. But I'll tell you what I'll do for you. We'll go round to the club, and there your young lordship will make acquaintance with somebody that can show you something of Edinburgh. You have never been here before? It is a great pity that there is an easterly haar, which is bad both for you and the objects you are wanting to see. However, it is lifting, and we'll get some luncheon, and then I will put you in the way. That is the best thing I can do for you. Malcolm, you

will send down all the documents relative to his lordship's affairs to Moray Place, this afternoon; and you can tell old Symington to be in attendance in case Lord Erradeen should wish to see him. That is your cousin the late lord's body servant. He is a man of great experience, and you might wish—; but all that can be settled later on. If Drysdales should send over about that case of theirs, ye will say, Malcolm, that I shall be here not later than three in the afternoon; and if old Blairallan comes fyking, ye can say I am giving the case my best attention; and if it's that big north-country fellow about his manse and his augmentation——"

"I fear that I am unpardonable," said Walter, "in interfering with your valuable time."

"Nothing of the sort. It is not every day that a Lord Erradeen comes into his inheritance; and as there are, may be, things not over-cheerful to tell you at night, we may as well make the best of it in the morning," said the old lawyer. He got himself into his coat as he spoke, slowly, not without an effort. The sun was struggling through the mist as they went out again into the streets, and the mid-day gun from the Castle helped for a moment to disperse the haar, and show the noble cliff on which it rears its head aloft. Mr. Milnathort paused to look with tender pride along the line—the houses and spires lifting out of the clouds, the sunshine breaking through, the crown of St. Giles's hovering like a visible sign of rank over

the head of the throned city, awakened in him that keen pleasure and elation in the beauty of his native place which is nowhere more warmly felt than in Edinburgh. He waved his hand towards the Old Town in triumph. "You may have seen a great deal, but ye will never have seen anything finer than that," he said.

"I have seen very little," said Walter; "but everybody has heard of Edinburgh, so that it does not take one by surprise."

"Ay, that is very wisely said. If it took you by surprise, and you had never heard of it before, the world would just go daft over it. However, it is a drawback of a great reputation that ye never come near it with your mind clear." Having said this the old gentleman dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand, and said, in a different tone, "You will be very curious about the family secrets you are coming into, Lord Erradeen."

Walter laughed.

"I am coming to them with my mind clear," he said. "I know nothing about them. But I don't believe much in family secrets. They belong to the middle ages. Nowadays we have nothing to conceal."

Mr. Milnathort listened to this blasphemy with a countenance in which displeasure struggled with that supreme sense that the rash young man would soon know better, which disarms reproof. He shook his head.

"You may say we can conceal but little," he said, "which is true enough, but not altogether true either. Courage is a fine thing, Lord Erradeen, and I am always glad to see it; and if you have your imagination under control, that will do ye still better service. In most cases it is not only what we see, but what we think we are going to see, that daunts us. Keep you your head cool, that is your best defence in all emergencies. It is better to be too bold than not to be bold enough, notwithstanding the poet's warning to yon warrior-maid of his."

These last words made Walter stare, for he was not very learned in poetry at the best, and was totally unprepared to hear Spenser from the lips of the old Scottish lawyer. He was silent for a little in mere perplexity, and then he said, with a laugh—

"You speak of danger as if we were on the eve of a battle. Are there giants to encounter or magicians? One would think we were living in the dark ages," Walter cried with a little impatience.

Mr. Milnathort said nothing more. He led the young man into one of the great stone palaces which form the line of Prince's Street, and which was then the seat of the old original club of Edinburgh society. Here Walter found himself in the midst of a collection of men with marked and individual faces, each one of whom ought to be somebody, he thought. Many of them were bound about the throat with white ties, like clergymen, but they did not belong to that pro-

fession. It gave the young man a sense of his own importance, which generally deserted him in Mr. Milnathort's presence, and of which he felt himself to stand in need, to perceive that he excited a great deal of interest among these grave and potent signors. There was a certain desire visible to make his acquaintance and to ascertain his political opinions, of which Walter was scarcely aware as yet whether he had any. It was suggested at once that he should be put up for the club, and invitations to dinner began to be showered upon him. He was stopped short in his replies to those cordial beginnings of acquaintance by Mr. Milnathort, who calmly assumed the guidance of his movements. "Lord Erradeen," he said, "is on his way West. Business will not permit him to tarry at this moment. We hope he will be back ere long, and perhaps stay a while in Edinburgh, and see what is to be seen in the way of society." This summary way of taking all control of his own movements from him astounded Walter so much that he merely stared at his old tyrant or vizier, and in his confusion of surprise and anger did not feel capable of saying anything, which, after all, was the most dignified way; for, he said to himself, it was not necessary to yield implicit obedience even if he refrained from open protest upon these encroachments on his liberty. In the mean time it was evident that the old lawyer did not intend him to have any liberty at all. He produced out of the recesses of the club library a beaming little man in spectacles,

to whom he committed the charge of the young stranger.

"Mr. Bannatyne," he said, "knows Edinburgh as well as I know my chambers, and he will just take you round what is most worth seeing."

When Walter attempted to escape with a civil regret to give his new acquaintance trouble he was put down by both with eagerness.

"The Old Town is just the breath of my nostrils," said the little antiquary.

"It cannot be said that it's a fragrant breath," said old Milnathort; "but since that is so, Lord Erradeen, you would not deprive our friend of such a pleasure: and we'll look for you by five or six at Moray Place, or earlier if you weary, for it's soon dark at this time of the year."

To find himself thus arrested in the first day of his emancipation and put into the hands of a conductor was so annoying yet so comic that Walter's resentment evaporated in the ludicrous nature of the situation and his consciousness that otherwise he would not know what to do with himself. But sight-seeing requires a warmer inspiration than this, and even the amusement of beholding his companion's enthusiasm over all the dark entries and worn-out inscriptions was not enough to keep Walter's interest alive. His own life at this moment was so much more interesting than anything else, so much more important than those relics of a past which had gone away altogether out of

mortal ken. When the blood is at high pressure in our veins, and the future lying all before us, it is very difficult to turn back, and force our eager eyes into contemplation of scenes with which we ourselves have little or no connection. The antiquary, however, was not to be baulked. He looked at his young companion with his head on one side like a critical bird. "You are paying no attention to me," he said half pathetically; "but 'cod, man (I beg your pardon, my lord!), ye *shall* be interested before I'm done.' With this threat he hurried Walter along to the noisiest and most squalid part of that noble but miserable street which is the pride of Edinburgh, and stopped short before a small but deep doorway, entering from a short flight of outside stairs. The door was black with age and neglect, and showed a sort of black cave within, out of which all kind of dingy figures were fluttering. The aspect of the muddy stairs and ragged wayfarers was miserable enough, but the mouldings of the lintel, and the spiral staircase half visible at one side, were of a grim antiquity, and so was the lofty tenement above, with its many rows of windows and high-stepped gable.

"Now just look here," said Mr. Bannatyne, "these arms will tell their own story."

There was a projecting boss of rude, half-obliterated carving on the door.

"I cannot make head nor tail of it," said the young man; his patience was beginning to give way.

"Lord Erradeen," cried the other with enthusiasm,

"this is worth your fattest farm; it is of more interest than half your inheritance; it is as historical as Holyrood. You are just awfully insensible, you young men, and think as little of the relics that gave you your consequences in the world—!" He paused a little in the fervour of his indignation, then added—"But there are allowances to be made for you as you were bred in England, and perhaps are little acquainted—My lord, this is Me'even's Close, bearing the name even now in its decay. It was my Lord Methven's lodging in the old time. Bless me! can your young eyes not read the motto that many people have found so significant? Look here," cried Walter's cicerone, tracing with his stick the half-effaced letters, "Baithe Sune and Syne."

Young Lord Erradeen began, as was natural, to feel ashamed of himself. He felt a pang of discomfort too, for this certainly bore no resemblance to the trim piece of modern Latin about the conquering power of virtue which was on his father's seal. The old possibility that he might turn out an impostor after all gleamed across his mind. "Does this belong to me?" he added with some eagerness, to veil these other and less easy sentiments.

"I know nothing about that," said Mr. Bannatyne with a slight tone of contempt. "But it was the Lord of Methven's lodging in the days when Scots lords lived in the Canongate of Edinburgh." Then he added, "There is a fine mantelpiece up-stairs which you had better see. Oh nobody will have any objection, a silver

key opens every door hereabout. If it should happen to be yours, my lord, and I were you," said the eager little man, "I would clear out the whole clanjamfry and have it thoroughly cleaned, and make a museum of the place. You would pick up many a curious bit as the auld houses go down. This way, to the right, and mind the hole in the wall. The doors are all carved, if you can see them for the dirt, and you'll not often see a handsomer room."

It was confusing at first to emerge out of the gloom of the stairs into the light of the great room, with its row of windows guiltless of either blind or curtain, which was in possession of a group of ragged children, squatting about in front of the deep, old-fashioned chimney, over which a series of elaborate carvings rose to the roof. The room had once been panelled, but half of the woodwork had been dragged down, and the rest was in a deplorable state. The contrast of the squalor and wretchedness about him, with the framework of the ancient, half-ruined grandeur, at once excited and distressed Walter. There was a bed, or rather a heap of something covered with the bright patches of an old quilt, in one corner, in another an old corner cupboard fixed into the wall, a rickety table and two chairs in the middle of the room. The solemn, unsheltered windows, like so many hollow, staring eyes, gazed out through the cold veil of the mist upon the many windows of an equally tall house on the other side of the street, the view being broken by a projecting

pole thrust forth from the middle one, upon which some dingy clothes were hanging to dry. The children hung together, getting behind the biggest of them, a ragged, handsome girl, with wild, elf locks, who confronted the visitors with an air of defiance. The flooring was broken in many places, and dirty beyond description. Walter felt it intolerable to be here, to breathe the stifling atmosphere, to contemplate this hideous form of decay. He thought some one was looking at him from behind the torn panels. "This is horrible," he said. "I hope I have nothing to do with it." Disgust and a shivering, visionary dread was in his voice.

"Your race has had plenty to do with it," said the antiquary. "It was here, they say, that the warlock-lord played most of his pliskies. It was his 'warm study of deals' like that they made for John Knox on the other side of the street. These walls have seen strange sights: and if you believe in witchcraft, as one of your name ought——"

"Why should one of my name believe in witchcraft? It appears," he said, with petulance, "that I know very little about my name."

"So I should have said," said the antiquary, dryly. "But no doubt you have heard of your great ancestor, the warlock-lord? I am not saying that I admire the character in the abstract; but an ancestor like that is fine for a family. He was mixed up in all the doings of the time, and he made his own out of every one of

them. And then he's a grand historical problem to the present day, which is no small distinction. You never heard of that? Oh, my lord, that's just not possible! He was the one whose death was never proved nor nothing about him, where he was buried, or the nature of his end, or if he ever came to an end at all; his son would never take the title, and forbade *his* son to do it: but by the time you have got to the second generation you are not minding so much. I noticed that the late lord would never enter into conversation on the subject. The family has always been touchy about it. It was the most complete disappearance I can recollect hearing of. Most historical puzzles clear themselves up in time: but this never was cleared up. Of course it has given rise to legends. You will perhaps be more interested in the family legends, Lord Erradeen?"

"Not at all," said Walter, abruptly. "I have told you I know very little about the family. What is it we came to see?—not this wretched place which makes me sick. The past should carry off its shell with it, and not leave these old clothes to rot here."

"Oh!" cried little Mr. Bannatyne, with a shudder. "I never suspected I was bringing in an iconoclast. That mantelpiece is a grand work of art, Lord Erradeen. Look at that serpent twisted about among the drapery —you'll not see such work now; and the ermine on that mantle just stands out in every hair, for all the grime and the smoke. It is the legend beneath the shield that is most interesting in the point of view of

the family. It's a sort of rhyming slogan, or rather it's an addition to the old slogan, 'Live, Me'even,' which everybody knows."

Walter felt a mingled attraction and repulsion which held him there undecided in front of the great old fireplace, like Hercules or any other hero between the symbolical good and evil. He had a great curiosity to know what all this meant mingled with an angry disinclination impossible to put into words. Mr. Bannatyne, who of course knew nothing of what was going on in his mind, took upon himself the congenial task of tracing the inscription out. It was doggerel, bad enough to satisfy every aspiration of an antiquary. It was as follows:—

"Né fleyt atte Helle, né fond for Heeven,
Live, Me'even."

"You will see how it fits in with the other motto," cried the enthusiast. "'Baithe Sune and Syne,' which has a grand kind of indifference to time and all its changes that just delights me. And the other has the same sentiment, 'Neither frightened for hell nor keen about heaven.' It is the height of impiety," he said, with a subdued chuckle; "but that's not inappropriate —it's far from inappropriate; it is just, in fact, what might have been expected. The warlock lord——"

"I hope you won't think me ungrateful," cried Walter, "but I don't think I want to know any more about that old ruffian. There is something in the place that oppresses me." He took out from his pocket

a handful of coins. (It was with the pleasure of novelty that he shook them together, gold and silver in one shining heap, and threw half a dozen of them to the little group before the fire.) "For heaven's sake let us get out of this!" he said, nervously. He could not have explained the sentiment of horror, almost of fear, that was in his mind. "If it is mine," he said, as they went down the spiral stair, groping against the black humid wall, "I shall pull it down and let in some air and clear the filth away."

"God bless me!" cried the antiquary in horror and distress, "you will never do that. The finest street in Christendom, and one of the best houses! No, no, Lord Erradeen, you will never do that!"

When Mr. Bannatyne got back to the club, he expressed an opinion of Lord Erradeen, which we are glad to believe further experience induced him to modify. He declared that old Bob Milnathort had given him such a handful as he had not undertaken for years. "Just a young Cockney!" he said, "a stupid Englishman! with no more understanding of history, or even of the share his own race has had in it, than that collie dog—indeed, Yarrow is far more intelligent, and a brute that is conscious of a fine descent. I am not saying that there are not fine lads among some of those English-bred young men, and some that have the sense to like old-fashioned things. But this young fellow is just a Cockney, he is just a young cynic. Pull down the house, said he? Spoil the first street in

Europe! We'll see what the Town Council—not to say the Woods and Forests—will say to that, my young man! And I hope I have Bailie Brown under my thumb!" the enraged antiquary cried.

Meantime Walter made his way through the dark streets in a tremor of excitement and dislike of which he could give no explanation to himself. Why should the old house have affected him so strongly! There was no reason for it that he knew. Perhaps there was something in the suddenness of the transition from the comfortable English prose of Sloebury to all these old world scenes and suggestions which had a disenchanting effect upon him. He had not been aware that he was more matter of fact than another, less likely to be affected by romance and historical associations. But so it had turned out. The grimy squalor of the place, the bad atmosphere, the odious associations, had either destroyed for him all the more attractive prejudices of long family descent, and a name which had descended through many generations — or else, something more subtle still, some internal influence, had communicated that loathing and sickness of the heart. Which was it? He could not tell. He said to himself, with a sort of scorn at himself, that probably the bourgeois atmosphere of Sloebury had made him incapable of those imaginative flights for which the highest and the lowest classes have a mutual aptitude. The atmosphere of comfort and respectability was against it. This idea rather exasperated him, and he dwelt upon it with a natural

perversity because he hated to identify himself as one of that stolid middle class which is above or beneath fanciful impulses. Then he began to wonder whether all this might not be part of a deep-laid scheme on the part of old Milnathort to get him, Walter, under his power. No doubt it was arranged that he should be brought to that intolerable place, and all the spells of the past called forth to subdue him by his imagination if never through his intellect. What did they take him for? He was no credulous Celt, but a sober-minded Englishman, not likely to let his imagination run away with him, or to be led by the nose by any *diablerie*, however skilful. They might make up their minds to it, that their wiles of this kind would meet with no success. Walter was by no means sure who he meant by *they*, or why they should endeavour to get him into their power; but he wanted something to find fault with—some way of shaking off the burden of a mental weight which he did not understand, which filled him with discomfort and new sensations which he could not explain. He could almost have supposed (had he believed in mesmerism, according to the description given of it in fiction—) that he was under some mesmeric influence, and that some expert, some adept, was trying to decoy him within some fatal circle of impression. But he set his teeth and all his power of resistance against it. They should not find him an easy prey.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE drawing-room in Moray Place seemed in the partial gloom very large and lofty. It must be remembered that Walter was accustomed only to the comparatively small rooms of an English country town where there was nobody who was very rich—and the solid, tall Edinburgh houses were imposing to him. There was no light but that which came from a blazing fire, and which threw an irregular ruddy illumination upon everything, but no distinct vision. He saw the tall windows indefinitely draped, and looking not unlike three colossal women in abundant vague robes standing against the wall. In a smaller room behind, which opened from this, the firelight was still brighter, but still only partially lit up the darkness. It showed, however, a table placed near the fire, and glowing with bright reflections from its silver and china; and just beyond that, out of the depths of what looked like an elongated easy-chair, a piece of whiteness, which was a female countenance. Walter, confused at his entrance, made out after a moment that it was a lady, half reclining on a sort of invalid *chaise longue*, who raised

herself slightly to receive him, with a flicker of a pair of white, attenuated hands. "You are very welcome, Lord Erradeen," she said, in a sweet, feeble voice. "Will you excuse my rising—for I'm a great invalid—and come and sit down here beside me? I have been looking for you this half-hour past." The hand which she held out to him was so thin that he scarcely felt its light pressure. "If you have no objection," said Miss Milnathort, "we will do with the firelight for a little longer. It is my favourite light. My brother sent me word I was to expect you, and after your cold walk you will be glad of a cup of tea." She did not pause for any reply, but went on, drawing the table towards her, and arranging everything with the skill of an accustomed hand. "I am just a cripple creature," she said. "I have had to learn to serve myself in this way, and Robert is extraordinarily thoughtful. There is not a mechanical convenience invented but I have it before it is well out of the brain that devised it; and that is how I get on so well with no backbone to speak of. All this is quite new to you," she said, quickly shaking off one subject and taking up another, with a little swift movement of her head.

"Do you mean—Edinburgh, or——"

"I mean everything," said the lady. "Edinburgh will be just a bit of scenery in the drama that is opening upon you, and here am I just another tableau. I can see it all myself with your young eyes. You can scarcely tell if it is real."

"That is true enough," said Walter, "and the scenery all turns upon the plot so far: which is what it does not always do upon the stage."

"Ay!" said Miss Milnathort, with a tone of surprise, "and how may that be? I don't see any particular significance in Holyrood. It is where all you English strangers go, as if Edinburgh had no meaning but Queen Mary."

"We did not go to Holyrood. We went to Lord Methven's Lodging, as I hear it is called: which was highly appropriate."

"Dear me," said the lady, "do you mean to tell me that John Bannatyne had that sense in him? I will remember that the next time Robert calls him an auld foozle. And so you saw the lodging of Methven? I have never seen it myself. Did it not make your heart sick to see all the poverty and misery in that awful street? Oh yes, I'm told it's a grand street: but I never have the heart to go into it. I think the place should die with the age that gave it birth."

This was a sentiment so entirely unlike what Walter had expected to hear, that for the moment it took from him all power of reply. "That would be hard upon antiquity," he said at length, "and I don't know what the artists would say, or our friend Mr. Bannatyne."

"He would have me burnt for a witch," the invalid said with a sweet little laugh; and then she added, "Ah, it is very well to talk about art; but there was

great sense in that saying of the old Reformers, 'Ding down the nest, and the crows will flee away.'"

"I expected," said Walter, "to find you full of reverence for the past, and faith in mysteries and family secrets, and—how can I tell?—ghosts perhaps." He laughed, but the invalid did not echo his laugh. And this brought a little chill and check to his satisfaction. The sense that one has suddenly struck a jarring note is highly uncomfortable when one is young. Walter put back his chair a little, not reflecting that the firelight revealed very little of his sudden blush.

"I have had no experience in what you call ghosts," she said, gravely. "I cannot, to tell the truth, see any argument against them, except just that we don't see them; and I think that's a pity, for my part."

To this, as it was a view of the subject equally new to him, Walter made no reply.

"Take you care, Lord Erradeen," she resumed hastily, "not to let yourself be persuaded to adopt that sort of nomenclature." There was a touch of Scotch in her accent that naturalised the long word, and made it quite in keeping. "Conclude nothing to be a ghost till you cannot account for it in any other way. There are many things that are far more surprising," she said; then, shaking off the subject once more with that little movement of her head, "You are not taking your tea. You must have had a tiring day after travelling all night. That is one of the modern fashions I cannot make up my mind to. They tell me the railway is not

so wearying as the long coach journeys we used to make in the old time."

"But you—can scarcely remember the old coach journeys? Why, my mother——"

"Very likely I am older than your mother; and I rarely budge out of this corner. I have never seen your mother, but I remember Captain Methven long long ago, who was not unlike the general outline of you, so far as I can make out. When the light comes you will see I am an old woman. It is just possible that this is why I am so fond of the firelight," she said with a laugh; "for I'm really very young though I was born long ago. Robert and me, we remember all our games and plays in a way that people that have had children of their own never do. We are just boy and girl still, and I've known us, after a long talk, forget ourselves altogether, and talk of papa and mamma!" She clapped her hands together at this, and went into a peal of genuine laughter, such as is always infectious. Walter laughed too, but in a half-embarrassed, half-unreal way. All was so strange to him, and this curious introduction into a half-seen, uncomprehended world the most curious of all.

"I would like to know a little about yourself," she resumed after a moment. "You were not in the secret that it was you who were the kin? It was strange your father should have left you in the dark."

"I can't remember my father," said Walter, hastily.

"That makes little difference; but you were always

a strange family. Now you, Robert tells me, you're not so very much of an Erradeen—you take after your mother's side. And I'm very very glad to hear it. It will perhaps be you, if you have the courage, that will put a stop to—many things. There are old rhymes upon that subject, but you will put little faith in old rhymes; I none at all. I believe they are just made up long after the occasion, just for the sake of the fun, or perhaps because some one is pleased with himself to have found a rhyme. Now that one that they tell me is in the Canongate—that about 'Live, Me'even—'"

"I thought you said you didn't know it?"

"I have never seen it; but you don't suppose I am ignorant of the subject, Lord Erradeen? Do you know I have been here stretched out in my chair these thirty years? and what else could I give my attention to, considering all things? Well, I do not believe in that. Oh, it's far too pat! When a thing is true it is not just so terribly in keeping. I believe it was made up by somebody that knew the story just as we do; probably a hundred years or more after the event."

Walter did not say that he was quite unacquainted with the event. His interest perhaps, though he was not aware of it, was a little less warm since he knew that Miss Milnathort was his mother's contemporary rather than his own; but he had come to the conclusion that it was better not to ask any direct questions. The light had faded much, and was now nothing more than a steady red glow in place of the leaping and blazing of

the flames. He scarcely saw his entertainer at all. There were two spots of brightness which moved occasionally, and which represented her face and the hands which she had clasped together (when they were not flickering about in incessant gesture) in her lap. But there was something altogether quaint and strange in the situation. It did not irritate him as the men had done. And then she had the good sense to agree with him in some respects, though the *mélange* of opinions in her was remarkable, and he did not understand what she would be at. There was an interval of quiet in which neither of them said anything, and then a large step was audible coming slowly up-stairs, and through the other drawing room.

"Here is Robert," the invalid said with a smile in her voice. It was nothing but a tall shadow that appeared, looming huge in the ruddy light.

"Have you got Lord Erradeen with you, Alison? and how are you and he getting on together?" said old Milnathort's voice.

Walter rose hastily to his feet with a feeling that other elements less agreeable were at once introduced, and that his pride was affronted by being discussed in this easy manner over his head.

"We are getting on fine, Robert. He is just as agreeable as you say, and I have great hopes will be the man. But you are late, and it will soon be time for dinner. I would advise you to show our young gentleman to his room, and see that he's comfortable.

And after dinner, when you have had your good meal, we'll have it all out with him."

"I am thinking, Alison, that there is a good deal we must go over that will be best between him and me."

"That must be as you please, Robert, my man," said the lady, and Walter felt like a small child who is being discussed over his head by grown-up persons, whom he feels to be his natural enemies. He rose willingly, yet with unconscious offence, and followed his host to his room, inwardly indignant with himself for having thus impaired his own liberty by forsaking his inn. The room however was luxuriously comfortable, shining with firelight, and a grave and respectable servant in mourning, was arranging his evening clothes upon the bed.

"This is Symington," said Mr. Milnathort, "he was your late cousin's body-servant. The late Lord Erradeen gave him a very warm recommendation. There might be things perhaps in which he would be of use."

"Thanks," said Walter, impulsively. "I have a man coming. I am afraid the recommendation is a little too late."

This unfortunately was not true; but the young man felt that to allow himself to be saddled with a sort of governor in the shape of the late lord's servant was more than could be required of him; and that he must assert himself before it was too late.

"You will settle that at your pleasure, my lord," said old Milnathort, and he went away shutting the door carefully, his steady, slow step echoing along the

passage. The man was not apparently in the least daunted by Walter's irritation. He went on mechanically, lightly brushing out a crease, and unfolding the coat with that affectionate care which a good servant bestows upon good clothes. Walter longed to have brought his old coat with him that everything should not have been so distressingly new.

"That will do," he said, "that will do. It is a pity to give you so much trouble when, as I tell you, I have another man engaged."

"It is no trouble, my lord; it is a pleasure. I came out of attachment to the family. I've been many years about my late lord. And however ye may remind yourself that you are but a servant, and service is no heritage, yet it's not easy to keep yourself from becoming attached."

"My good man," said Walter, half impatient, half touched, "you never saw me in your life before. I can't see how you can have any attachment to me."

Symington had a long face, with a somewhat lugubrious expression, contradicted by the twinkle of a pair of humorous, deep-set eyes. He gave a glance up at Walter from where he stood fondling the lappels of the new coat.

"There are many kinds of attachments, my lord," he said oracularly; "some to the person and some to the race. For a number of years past I have, so to speak, just identified myself with the Erradeens. It's not common in England, so far as I can hear, but it's just our old Scots way. I will take no other service. So,

being free, if your lordship pleases, I will just look after your lordship's things till the other man comes."

Walter perceived in a moment by the way Symington said these words that he had no faith whatever in the other man. He submitted accordingly to the ministrations of the family retainer, with a great deal of his old impatience, tempered by a sense of the humour of the situation. It seemed that he was never to have any control over himself. He had barely escaped from the tutelage of home when he fell into this other which was much more rigid. "Poor mother!" he said to himself, with an affectionate recollection of her many cares, her anxious watchfulness; and laughed to himself at the thought that she was being avenged.

Mr. Milnathort's table was handsome and liberal; the meal even too abundant for the solitary pair who sat alone at a corner of the large table, amid a blaze of light. Miss Milnathort did not appear.

"She never comes down. She has never sat down at table since she had her accident, and that is thirty years since."

There was something in Mr. Milnathort's tone as he said this that made Walter believe that her accident too had something to do with the family. Everything tended towards that, or sprang from it. Had he been to the manner born, this would no doubt have seemed to him natural enough; but as it was he could not keep himself from the idea either that he was being laughed at, or that some design was hidden beneath

this constant reference. The dinner, however, went off quietly. It was impossible to discuss anything of a private character in the presence of Milnathort's serious butler, and of the doubly grave apparition of Symington, who helped the other to wait.

Walter had never dined so solemnly before. It must be added, however, that he had seldom dined so well. It was a pity that he was so little knowing in this particular. Mr. Milnathort encouraged him through the repast by judicious words of advice and recommendation. He was very genial and expansive at this most generous moment of the day. Fond of good fare himself he liked to communicate and recommend it, and Walter's appetite was excellent, if perhaps his taste was uncultivated. The two noiseless attendants circulating about the table served them with a gravity in perfect keeping with the importance of the event, which was to the old lawyer the most interesting of the day.

When they were left alone finally, the aspect of affairs changed a little. Mr. Milnathort cleared his throat, and laid aside his napkin. He said—

"We must not forget, Lord Erradeen, that we have a great deal of business to get through. But you have had a fatiguing day, and probably very little sleep last night"—

"I slept very well, I assure you," Walter replied cheerfully.

"Ay, ay, you are young," said Mr. Milnathort, with a half-sigh. "Still all the financial statements, and to

give you a just view of all that's coming to you, will take time. With your permission we'll keep that till to-morrow. But there's just a thing or two—. Lord save us!" he cried suddenly, "you're not the kind of person for this. There is many a one I know that would have liked it all the better—till they knew—for what's attached to it. I thought as much when I first set eyes upon you. This will be one that will not take it all for gospel, I said to myself—one that will set up his own judgment, and demand the reason why."

Walter, a little uncertain at first how to take this, ended by being gratified with such an estimate of himself. It showed, he felt, more perception than he had looked for, and he answered, with a little complacency, "I hope you think that is the right way of approaching a new subject."

"I am not unbiased myself," said the lawyer, "and I have had to do with it all my life. There are conditions connected with your inheritance, Lord Erradeen, that may seem out of the way to a stranger. If you had succeeded in the way of nature, as your father's son, they would not have been new to you, and you would have been prepared. In that way it is hard upon you. There was one of your ancestors that laid certain conditions, as I was saying, upon every heir. He was one that had, as you may say, a good right to do that, or whatever else he pleased, seeing he was the making of the family. In old days it was no more than a bit small highland lairdship. It was he that gave it consequence;

but he has held a heavy hand upon his successors ever since."

"Would it be he by any chance of whom Mr. Bannatyne was discoursing to me," said Walter, "under the title of the warlock-lord?"

"Ah! John Bannatyne took that upon him?" cried Mr. Milnathort with vivacity. His eyes gleamed from under his deep-set brows. "The less a man knows the more ready he is to instruct the world: but I never thought he would take that upon him. So you see, as I was saying, there are certain formalities to go through. It is understood that once a year, wherever he may be, Lord Erradeen should pass, say a week, say two or three days, in the old castle of Kinloch Houran, which is the old seat of the family, the original of the Methven race."

Walter had been listening with some anxiety. He drew a long breath as Mr. Milnathort came to a pause. "Is that all?" he cried, with a voice of relief. Then he laughed. "I was winding myself up to something heroic, but if it is only a periodical retirement to an old castle—to think, I suppose, upon one's sins and examine one's conscience——"

"Something very like that," said the old man, somewhat grimly.

"Well! It might be a great inconvenience; but there is nothing very appalling in the prospect, if that is all."

"It is all, Lord Erradeen—if ye except what passes

there, a thing that is your own concern, and that I have never pried into for my part. And just this beside, that you are expected there at once and without delay."

"Expected—at once and without delay." Walter grew red with anger at these peremptory words. "This sounds a little arbitrary," he said. "Expected? by whom? and to what purpose? I don't understand——"

"Nor do I, my young lord. But it's so in the documents, and so has it been with every Lord of Erradeen up to this period. It is the first thing to be done. Before you come into enjoyment of anything, or take your place in the country, there is this visit—if you like to call it a visit: this—sojourn: not a long one, at least, you may be thankful—to be made——"

"To what purpose?" Walter repeated, almost mechanically. He could not, himself, understand the sudden tempest of resistance, of anger, of alarm that got up within him. "There is reason in everything," he said, growing pale. "What is it for? What am I to do?"

"Lord Erradeen, a minute since you said, was that all? And now you change colour: you ask why, and wherefore—"

Walter made a great effort to regain command of himself. "It is inconsistent, I allow," he said. "Somehow, the order to go now is irritating and unpleasant. I suppose it's simple enough, a piece of tyranny such as people seem to think they may indulge in after they're

dead. But it is abominably arbitrary and tyrannical. What good does the old beggar think——"

"Hold your peace," cried Mr. Milnathort, with a little trepidation. "We have no right to call names, and I would not like it to be thought——" Here he paused with a sort of uneasy smile, and added, "I am speaking nonsense," with a vague glance about him. "I think we might join my sister up-stairs; and, as she knows just as much as I do, or, maybe, more, you can speak as freely as you please before her—oh, quite freely. But, my dear young lord, call no names!" cried Mr. Milnathort. He got up hurriedly, leaving his wine which he had just filled out, a demonstration of sincerity which made a great impression upon Walter: and threw open the door. "Putting off the business details till to-morrow, I know nothing else that we cannot discuss before Alison," he said.

Walter was much startled when he went back to the inner drawing-room and found it lighted. Miss Milnathort did not employ any of those devices by which light is softened to suit the exigencies of beauty which has passed its prime. The light (alas for the prejudices of the æsthetic reader) was gas; and, though it was slightly disguised by means of opal glass, it still poured down in a brilliant flood, and the little room was almost as light as day. She lay in her *chaise longue* placed under this illumination. Her face was preternaturally young, almost childish, small, and full of colour, her hair snow-white. She seemed to have been exempted

from the weight of years, in compensation, perhaps, for other sufferings; her skin was smooth and unwrinkled, her eyes full of dewy brightness like those of a girl. Her dress, so far as it was visible, was white, made of cashmere or some other woollen material, solid and warm, but with lace at the neck, and pretty ribbons breaking the monotony of the tint. She looked like a girl dressed for some simple party, who had lain there waiting for the little festivity to begin, for no one could imagine how many years. Her hands were soft and round and young like her face. The wind had not been allowed to visit her cheek too roughly for a lifetime. What had happened before the event which she and her brother had both referred to as her "accident" belonged to a period which had evidently nothing to do with the present. Walter saw at a glance that every possible convenience which could be invented for an invalid surrounded her. She had a set of bookshelves at one side with vacant spaces where she could place the book she was reading. Tables that wheeled towards her at a touch, with needlework, with knitting, with drawing materials, were arranged within reach. One of these made into a desk and put itself across her couch by another adaptation. It was evident that the tenderest affection and care had made this prison of hers into a sort of museum of every ingenuity that had ever been called to the help of the suffering. She lay, or rather sat, for that was her general position, with an air of pleasant expectation on her face, and

received them with smiles and hands held out. "Come away, come away," she said in her soft Scotch. "I have been wearying for you." Walter thought there was something of age in her voice, but that might have been only the Scotch, and the unusual form of her salutation. She pointed out a chair to him carefully placed for her convenience in seeing and hearing. "Come and tell me what you think about it all," she said.

"I have not heard much," said Walter, "to think about: except that I am to go away directly, which does not please me at all, Miss Milnathort."

"Oh, you will come back, you will come back," she said.

"I hope so: but the reason why I should go doesn't seem very plain. What would happen, I wonder, if I didn't?" Walter said, lightly. He was surprised to see how much effect was produced upon his companions by this very simple utterance. Miss Milnathort put her hands together, as if to clasp them in triumph. Her brother stood looking down upon the others, with his back to the light, and an air of alarmed displeasure.

"One result would be that certain of the lands would pass to the next heir," he said; "besides, perhaps—other penalties: that I would not incur, Lord Erradeen, if I were you."

"What penalties? But do you think at this time of day," said Walter, "that ridiculous conditions of this kind that can mean nothing could really be upheld by

the law—now that bequests of all kinds are being interfered with, and even charities?"

"Robert, that is true. There was the Melville mortification that you had so much trouble about, and that was a charity. How much more, as young Lord Erradeen is saying, when it is just entirely out of reason."

"You should hold your peace on legal subjects, Alison. What can you know about them? I disapprove of all interference with the will of a testator, Lord Erradeen. I hold it to be against the law, and against that honour and honesty that we owe to the dead as well as the living. But there has always been a license allowed in respect to charities. So far as they are intended to be for the good of the poor, we have a right to see that the testator's meaning is carried out, even if it be contrary to his stipulations. But in a private case there is no such latitude. And you must always respect the testator's meaning, which is very clear in this case, as even you will allow, Alison."

"Ay, clear enough," cried the young-old lady, shaking her white head. "But I'm on your side, Lord Erradeen. I would just let them try their worst, and see what would come of it, if, instead of a lame woman, I was a young man, lively and strong like you."

"The question is," said Walter, "for I have become prudent since I have had property—whether for such an insignificant affair it is worth while losing a substantial advantage, as Mr. Milnathort says? And then,

perhaps, a new man like myself, coming into an antiquated routine, there would be a sort of discourtesy, a want of politeness—" He laughed. "One ought, I suppose, to be on one's best behaviour in such circumstances," he said.

Miss Milnathort's countenance fell a little. She did not make any reply; but she had been listening with an air so eager and full of vivacity, anxious to speak, that the young man at once perceived the disappointment in her expressive little face. He said quickly—

"That does not please you? What would you have me to do?" with an involuntary sense that she had a right to an opinion.

Mr. Milnathort at this moment sat heavily down on the other side, giving great emphasis to his interruption by the sound of his chair drawn forward, a sound which she protested against with a sudden contraction of her forehead, putting up a delicate hand.

"I beg your pardon, my dear, for making a noise. You must not consult Alison, Lord Erradeen; she is prejudiced on one side—and I—perhaps I am, if not prejudiced, yet biased, on the other. You must act on your own instinct, which, as far as I can judge, is a just one. It would be a great incivility, as you say, for a far-away collateral, that is really no more than a stranger, to set himself against the traditions of a house."

Walter did not much like to hear himself described as a far-away collateral. It sounded like a term of

reproach, and as he did not choose to say anything more on this matter, he made the best change of subject he could.

"I wonder," he said, "what would happen with any of the fantastic old feudal tenures if a new heir, a new man like myself, should simply refuse to fulfil them."

"Mostly they take a pride and a pleasure in fulfilling them," said the old lawyer.

"But suppose," cried Walter, "for the sake of argument, that a new Duke of Marlborough should say, 'What rubbish! Why should I send that obsolete old flag to Windsor?' That is a modern instance; or suppose——"

"Just that," cried Miss Milnathort, striking in with a flicker of her pretty hands. "Suppose young Glenearn should refuse when he comes of age to hear a word about that secret cha'mer——"

"What would happen?" said Walter, with a laugh of profane and irreverent youth.

Mr. Milnathort rose to his full height; he pushed back his chair with an indignant movement.

"You may as well ask me," he said, "what would happen if the pillars of the earth should give way. It is a thing that cannot be, at least till the end of all things is at hand. I will ring for prayers, Alison. My Lord Erradeen is young; he knows little; but this kind of profane talk is not to be justified from you and me."

Then the bell was rung; the servants came trooping

up-stairs, and Symington gave Walter a sidelong look as he took his seat behind their backs. It seemed to assert a demure claim of proprietorship, along with a total want of faith in the "other man." Young Lord Erradeen found that it was all he could do to restrain an irreverent laugh. The position was so comic, that his original sense of angry resistance disappeared before it. He was going off against his will to pass through a mysterious ordeal in an old ruined house, under charge of a servant whom he did not want, and in obedience to a stipulation which he disowned. He was not half so free an agent as he had been when he was poor Walter Methven, knocking about the streets of Sloebury and doing much what he liked, though he thought himself in bondage. Bondage! he did not know in the old days what the word would mean.

CHAPTER IX.

THE day on which Walter set out for Kinloch Houran was fine and bright, the sky very clear, the sun shining, the hills standing out against the blue, and every line of the tall trees clearly marked upon the transparent atmosphere. It was not till two days after the conversation above recorded—for there had been much to explain, and Walter was so little acquainted with business that instructions of various kinds were necessary. Miss Milnathort was visible much earlier than usual on the morning of his departure, and he was admitted to see her. She was paler than before, and her little soft face was full of agitation; the corners of her mouth turned down, and her upper lip, which was a trifle too long, quivering. This added rather than took away from her appearance of youth. She was like a child who had exhausted itself with crying, and still trembled with an occasional sob. She stretched up her arms to him as if she would have put them round his neck, and bade God bless him with a tremulous voice.

"You must have plenty of courage," she said; "and you must never, never give up your own way."

Walter was touched to the heart by this look of trouble on the innocent, young-old face.

"I thought it was always right to give up one's own way," he said, in the light tone which he had come to employ with her.

She made an effort to smile in response.

"Oh yes, oh yes, it's the fashion to say so. You are a self-denying race, to believe yourselves; but this time you must not yield."

"To whom am I supposed to be about to yield?" he asked. "You may be sure I sha'n't unless I can't help myself."

The tears overflowed her bright old eyes; her hands shook as they held his.

"God bless you! God bless you!" she said. "I will do nothing but pray for you, and you will tell me when you come back."

He left her lying back upon her cushions sobbing under her breath. All this half-perplexed, half-amused the young man. She was a very strange little creature, he felt, neither old nor young; there was no telling the reason of her emotion. She was so much indulged in all her whims, like a spoiled child, that perhaps these tears were only her regrets for a lost playmate. At the same time Walter knew that this was not so, and was angry with himself for the thought. But how find his way out of the perplexity? He shook it off, which is always the easiest way; and soon the landscape began to attract his attention, and he forgot by degrees that there was anything very unusual in the circumstances of his journey. It was not till the first long stage of

this journey was over that he was suddenly roused to a recollection of everything involved, by the appearance of Symington at the carriage window, respectfully requesting to know whether he had wanted anything. Walter had not remembered, or if he had remembered had thought no more of it, that this quietly officious retainer had taken all trouble from him at the beginning of his journey, as he had done during his stay in Mr. Milnathort's house.

"What! are you here?" he said, with suprise, and a mixture of amusement and offence.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," said Symington, with profound and serious respect, yet always a twinkle in his eye, "but as the other man did not turn up—and your lordship could scarcely travel without some attendance——"

He had to rush behind to get his place in the train in the midst of his sentence, and Walter was left to think it over alone. In the balance between anger and amusement the latter fortunately won the day. The comic side of the matter came uppermost. It seemed to him very droll that he should be taken possession of, against his will, by the valet who professed an attachment to the race, not to the individual members of it, whose head was garlanded with crape in the quaint Scotch way for Walter's predecessor, and who had "identified himself with the Erradeens." He reminded himself that he was in the country of Caleb Balderstone and Ritchie Moniplies, and he resigned himself to

necessity. Symington's comic yet so respectful consciousness that "the other man" was a mere imagination, was joke enough to secure his pardon, and Walter felt that though the need of attendance was quite new in his life, that it might be well on his arrival in a strange country and a lonely ruined house, to have some one with him who was not ignorant either of the locality or the household.

The country increased in interest as he went on, and by and by he forgot himself in gazing at the mountains which appeared in glimpses upon the horizon, then seemed to draw nearer, closing in upon the road, which led along by the head of one loch after another, each encompassed by its circle of hills. Walter knew very little about Scotland. He thought it a barren and wild country, all bleak and gloomy, and the lavish vegetation of the west filled him with surprise and admiration. The sun was near its setting when the railway journey came to an end, and he found himself at a village station, from which a coach ran to Kinloch Houran. It appeared that there was no other vehicle to be had, and though it was cold there was nothing else for it but to clamber up on the top of the rude coach, which was a sort of *char-à-banc* without any interior. Walter felt that it would become him ill, notwithstanding his new rank, to grumble at the conveyance, upon which there mounted nimbly a girl whom he had remarked when leaving Edinburgh, and whom he had watched for at all the pauses of the

journey. He thought her the very impersonation of all he had ever heard of Scotch beauty, and so would most observers to whom Scotland is a new country. The native Scot is aware that there are as many brown locks as golden, and as many dark maidens as fair ones in his own country; but notwithstanding, to the stranger it is the fair who is the type. This young lady was warmly clothed in dark tweed, of the ruddy heathery hue which is now so general, not long enough to conceal her well-shod feet, closely fitting, and adapted for constant walking and movement. She seemed to be met by friends all along the route. From the carriage window Walter saw her look out with little cries of pleasure. "Oh, is that you, Jack?" "Oh, Nelly, where are you going?" "Oh, come in here, there is room in this carriage," and such like. She was always leaning out to say a word to somebody, either of farewell or welcome. "You will remember me to your mother," old gentlemen would call to her, as the train went on. Walter was greatly in want of amusement, and he was at the age when a girl is always interesting. She became to him the heroine of the journey. He felt that he was collecting a great deal of information about her as they travelled on, and had begun to wonder whether he should ever find out who she was, or see any more of her, when he perceived her, to his delight, getting out, as he himself did, at Baldally. She was met by a respectable woman servant, who took possession of her baggage, while the young

lady herself ran across the road to the coach, and with a hearty greeting to John the coachman darted up to the seat immediately behind him, where her maid presently joined her. Walter, and a personage of the commercial traveller class, shared the coachman's seat in front, and Symington and some other humbler passengers sat behind. The coach was adapted for summer traffic, so that there were several lines of empty seats between the two sets of travellers. It gave Walter a great deal of pleasure to hear the soft voice of his fellow-traveller pouring forth, low yet quite audible, an account of her journey to her maid, who was evidently on the most confidential terms with her young mistress.

"Has mamma missed me—much?" she asked after the little Odyssey was over.

"Oh, Miss Oona, to ask that," cried the woman; "how should we no miss you?" and then there ensued a number of details on the home side. The girl had been on a visit in Edinburgh, and had gone to balls, and "seen everything." On the other hand many small matters, faithfully reported, had filled up the time of separation. Walter listened to all this innocent interchange with great amusement and interest as the coach made its way slowly up the ascents of the hilly road. It was not in itself an agreeable mode of progression: the wind was icy cold, and swept through and through the unfortunates who faced it in front, sharpening into almost absolute needle points of ice

when the pace quickened, and the noisy, jolting vehicle lumbered down the further side of a hill, threatening every moment to pitch the passengers into the heathery bog on one side or the other. He tried to diminish his own discomfort by the thought that he took off the icy edge of the gale and sheltered the little slim creature in her close ulster behind, about whose shoulders the maid had wound the snowy mass of a great white knitted shawl. The low sun was in their faces as they toiled and rattled along, and the clear wintry blue of the sky was already strewn with radiant rosy masses of cloud. When they reached the highest point of the road the dazzling gleam of the great loch lying at their feet and made into a mirror of steel by the last blaze of the sun before it disappeared, dazzled the young man, who could see nothing except the cold intolerable brightness; but in a moment more the scene disclosed itself. Hills all purple in the sunset, clothed with that ineffable velvet down which softens every outline, opened out on either side, showing long lines of indistinct green valleys and narrower ravines that ran between, all converging towards the broad and noble inland sea fringed with dark woods and broken with feathery islands, which was the centre of the landscape. The wonderful colour of the sky reflected in the loch, where everything found a reflection, and every knoll and island floated double, changed the character of the scene and neutralised the dazzling coldness of the great water-mirror. Walter's involuntary exclamation at this

sight stopped for a moment all the conversation going on. "By Jove," he said, "how glorious!" They all stopped talking, the coachman, the traveller, the woman behind, and looked at him. Big John the driver, who knew everybody, eyed him with a slightly supercilious air, as one who felt that the new-comer could not be otherwise than contemptible, more or less, even though his sentiments were irreproachable. "Ay, sir—so that's your opinion? most folk have been beforehand with ye," said John.

The commercial traveller added, condescendingly, "It is cold weather for touring, sir; but it's a grand country, as ye say." And then they resumed their conversation.

The young lady behind was far more sympathetic. She made a distinct pause, and when she spoke again it was with a flattering adoption of Walter's tone to point out to her companion how beautiful the scene was.

"The isle is floating too, Mysie—look! If we could get there soon enough we might land upon one of those rosy clouds."

Walter gave a grateful glance behind him, and felt that he was understood.

"That is just your poetry, Miss Oona," said the maid; "but, bless me, I have never told ye: there has been the light lighted in the castle these two nights past. We have just thought upon you all the time, and how much taken up you would be about it, your mamma and me."

"The light on the castle!" cried the young lady; and at this the coachman, turning slightly round, entered into the conversation.

"That has it," he said; "I can back her up in that; just as clear and as steady as a star. There are many that say they never can see it; but they would be clever that had not seen it these two past nights."

"Who says they cannot see it?" said the girl, indignantly.

John gave a little flick to his leader, which made the whole machine vibrate and roll.

"Persons of the newfangled kind that believe in nothing," he said. "They will tell ye it cannot be—so how can you see it? though it is glinting in their faces all the time."

"You are meaning me, John," said the traveller on the box-seat; "and there's truth in what you say. I've seen what you call the light, and no doubt it has the appearance of a light; but if ye tell me it's something supernatural, there can be no doubt I will answer ye that there's nothing supernatural. If you were to tell me ye had seen a ghost, I would just reply in the same way. No, my man, I'm not impeachin' your veracity. You saw something, I'll allow; but no' a ghost, for there are no ghosts to see."

"That's just an awfu' easy way of settlin' the question," said the maid from behind—and then she went on in a lower tone: "This will be the third night since it began, and we've a' seen it on the Isle. Hamish, he

says the new lord maun be of a dour kind to need so many warnings. And he's feared ill will come of it; but I say the new lord, no' bein' here away nor of this country at all, how is he to ken?"

The girl's voice was now quite low, almost a whisper: but Walter being immediately in front of her could still hear. "Has anything been heard," she said, "of the new lord?"

"Very little, Miss Oona, only that he's a young lad from the south with no experience, and didna even know that he was the heir; so how could he ken? as I say to Hamish. But Hamish he insists that it's in the blood, and that he would ken by instinck; and that it shows an ill-will, and ill will come of it."

"If I were he," cried the girl, "I would do the same. I would not be called like that from the end of the world wherever I was."

"Oh, whisht, Miss Oona. It is such an auld, auld story; how can the like of you say what should be done?"

"I would like myself," said the traveller, "to come to the bottom of this business. What is it for, and who has the doing of it? The moment you speak of a light ye pre-suppose a person that lights it and mainy adjuncks and accessories. Now there's nobody, or next to nobody, living in that auld ruin. It's some rendeyvouss, I can easily understand that. The days of conspiracies are gone by, or I would say it was something against the state; but whatever it is, it must have a purpose, and

mortal hands must do it, seeing there are no other. I have heard since ever I began to travel this country of the Kinloch Houran light, but I never heard a reason assigned."

"It's the living lord," cried the maid, "as everybody knows! that is called to meet with——"

Here the young lady interfered audibly—

"Mysie, not a word!" The woman's voice continued, stifled as if a hand had been laid on her mouth.

"With them that are—with ane that is— I'm saying nothing, Miss Oona, but what all the loch is well aware——"

"It's just a ferlie of this part of the world," said John the driver; "nae need of entering into it with them that believe naething. I'm no what ye call credulous mysel'; but when it comes to the evidence of a man's ain senses——"

"And what have your senses said to ye, my fine fellow? that there's a queer kind of a glimmer up upon the auld tower? So are there corpse-candles, if I'm not mistaken, seen by the initiated upon your burial isle—what do you call it?"

"And wha has a word to say gainst that?" cried the driver angrily; whilst Mysie behind murmured—"It's well seen ye have naething to do with any grave there."

Now Walter was as entirely free from superstition as any young man need be; but when he heard the laugh with which the sceptic greeted these protests, he had the greatest mind in the world to seize him by the

collar and pitch him into the bog below. Why? but the impulse was quite unreasonable and defied explanation. He had as little faith in corpse-candles as any bagman ever had, and the embarrassed and uneasy consciousness he had that the end of his journey was inexplicable, and its purpose ridiculous, led him much more to the conclusion that he was being placed in a ludicrous position, than that there was anything solemnly or awfully mysterious in it. Nevertheless, so far from ranging himself upon the side of the enlightened modern who took the common-sense view of these Highland traditions, his scorn and impatience of him was beyond words. For his own part he had not been sufficiently self-possessed to join in the discussion; but at this moment he ventured a question—

"Is this old castle you speak of—" here he paused not knowing how to shape his inquiry; then added, "uninhabited?" for want of anything better to say.

"Not altogether," said John; "there is auld Macalister and his wife that live half in the water, half out of the water. And it's the story in the parish that there are good rooms; aye ready for my lord. But I can tell ye naething about that, for I'm always on the road, and I see nothing but a wheen tourists in the summer, that are seeking information, and have none to give, puir creatures. There's a new lord just come to the title; ye will maybe have met with him if ye're from the south, for he's just an English lad."

"England, my man John, is a wide road," said the

traveller; "there are too many for us all to know each other as ye do in a parish; this gentleman will tell ye that."

John's satirical explanation that he had not suspected Mr. Smith, whose northern accent was undoubted, of being an Englishman, saved Walter from any necessity of making a reply; and by this time the coach was rattling down upon a little homely inn, red-roofed and white-walled, which stood upon a knoll, overlooking the loch, and was reflected in all its brightness of colour in that mirror. The ground shelved rapidly down to the water-side, and there were several boats lying ready to put out into the loch—one a ponderous ferry boat, another a smaller, but still substantial and heavy, cobble, in which a man with a red shirt and shaggy locks was standing up relieved against the light. Walter jumped down hurriedly with the hope of being in time to give his hand to the young lady, who perhaps had divined his purpose, for she managed to alight on the other side and so balk him. The landlady of the little inn had come out to the door, and there was a great sound of salutations and exclamations of welcome. "But I mustna keep you, Miss Oona, and your mamma countin' the moments; and there's two or three parcels," the woman said. The air had begun to grow a little brown, as the Italians say, that faint veil of gathering shade which is still not darkness, was putting out by degrees the radiance of the sky, and as Walter stood listening all the mingled sounds of the arrival rose together in a

similar mist of sound, through which he sought for the soft little accents of the young lady's voice amid the noises of the unharnessing, the horses' hoofs and ostler's pails, and louder tones. Presently he saw her emerge from the group with her maid, laden with baskets and small parcels, and embarking under the conduct of the man in the red shirt, whom she greeted affectionately as Hamish, assume her place in the stern, and the ropes of the rudder, with evident use and wont. To watch her steer out into the darkening loch, into the dimness and cold, gave the young man a vague sensation of pain. It seemed to him as if the last possible link with the human and sympathetic was detaching itself from him. He did not know her indeed, but it does not take a long time or much personal knowledge to weave this mystic thread between one young creature and another. Most likely, he thought, she had not so much as noticed him: but she had come into the half-real dream of his existence, and touched his hand, as it were, in the vague atmosphere which separates one being from another. Now he was left with nothing around him but the darkening landscape and the noisy little crowd about the coach; no one who could give him any fellowship or encouragement in the further contact which lay before him with the mysterious and unknown.

After a few moments the landlady came towards him, smoothing down her white apron, which made a great point in the landscape, so broad was it and so white. She smiled upon him with ingratiating looks.

"Will you be going north, sir?" she said; "or will you be biding for the night? Before we dish up the dinner and put the sheets on the bed we like to know."

"Who is that young lady that has just gone away?" said Walter, not paying much attention; "and where is she going? It is late and cold for the water. Do you ever get frozen here?"

"That is Miss Oona of the Isle," said the landlady; "but as I was saying, sir, about the beds——"

"Are the islands inhabited then?" said Walter; "and where is Kinloch Houran? Does one go there by water too?"

"No, Mistress Macgregor," said Symington's voice on the other side; "my lord will not bide here to-night. I've been down to the beach, and there is a boat there, but not your lordship's own, any more than there was a carriage waiting at Baldally. We must just put our pride in our pockets, my lord, and put up with what we can get. When your lordship's ready we're all ready."

By this time Big John and all the others were standing in a group staring at Lord Erradeen with all their eyes. John explained himself in a loud voice, but with an evident secret sense of shame.

"Hoo was I to ken? A lord has nae business to scour the country like that, like ony gangrel body—sitting on the seat just like the rest of us—Mr. Smith and him and me. Lord! hoo was I to ken? If you

hear nae good of yourself, it is just your ain blame. I was thinking of no lord or any such cattle. I was just thinking upon my beasts. As for a lord that gangs about like yon, deceiving honest folk, I wouldna give that for him," John said, snapping his finger and thumb. His voice sank at the end, and the conclusion of the speech was but half audible. Mrs. Macgregor interposing her round, soft intonation between the speaker and the stranger.

"Eh, my lord, I just beg your pardon! I had no notion—and I hope your lordship found them a' civil. Big John is certainly a little quick with his tongue—"

"I hope you're not supposing, Mistress Macgregor, that his lordship would fash himself about Big John," said Symington, who had now taken the direction of affairs. Walter, to tell the truth, did not feel much inclination to enter into the discussion. The gathering chill of the night had got into his inner man. He went down towards the beach slowly pondering, taking every step with a certain hesitation It seemed to him that he stood on the boundary between the even ground of reality and some wild world of fiction which he did not comprehend, but had a mingled terror and hatred of. Behind him everything was homely and poor enough; the light streamed out of the open doors and uncovered windows, the red roof had a subdued glow of cheerfulness in the brown air, the sounds about were cheerful, full of human bustle and movement, and mutual good offices. The men led the horses away

with a certain kindness; the landlady, with her white apron, stopped to say a friendly word to Big John, and interchanged civilities with the other humble passengers who were bringing her no custom, but merely passing her door to the ferry-boat that waited to take them across the loch. Everywhere there was a friendly interchange, a gleam of human warmth and mutual consolation. But before him lay the dark water, with a dark shadow of mingled towers and trees lying upon it at some distance. He understood vaguely that this was Kinloch Houran, and the sight of it was not inviting. He did not know what it might be that should meet him there, but whatever it was it repelled and revolted him. He seemed to be about to overpass some invisible boundary of truth and to venture into the false, into regions in which folly and trickery reigned. There was in Walter's mind all the sentiment of his century towards the supernatural. He had an angry disbelief in his mind, not the tranquil contempt of the indifferent. His annoyed and irritated scorn perhaps was nearer faith than he supposed; but he was impatient of being called upon to give any of his attention to those fables of the past which imposture only could keep up in the present. He felt that he was going to be made the victim of some trick or other. The country people evidently believed, indeed, as was natural enough to their simplicity; but Walter felt too certain that he would see the mechanism behind the most artful veil to believe it possible that

he himself could be taken in, even for a moment. And he had no desire to find out the contemptible imposture. He felt the whole business contemptible; the secluded spot, the falling night, the uninhabited place, were all part of the jugglery. Should he voluntarily make himself a party to it, and walk into the snare with his eyes open? He felt sure, indeed, that he would remain with his eyes open all the time, and was not in the least likely to submit to any black art that might be exercised upon him. But he paused, and asked himself was it consistent with the dignity of a reasonable creature, a full-grown man, to allow himself to be drawn into any degrading contact with this jugglery at all?

The boat lay on the beach with his baggage already in it, and Symington standing respectful awaiting his master's pleasure. Symington, no doubt, was the god out of the machinery who had the *fin mot* of everything and all the strings in his hand. What if he broke the spell peremptorily and retired to the ruddy fireside of the inn and defied family tradition? He asked himself again what would come of it? and replied to himself scornfully that nothing could come of it. What law could force him to observe an antiquated superstition? It was folly to threaten him with impossible penalties. And even if a thing so absurd could happen as that he should be punished in purse or property for acting like a man of sense instead of a fool, what then? The mere possibility of the risk made Walter more disposed

to incur it. It was monstrous and insufferable that he should be made to carry out a tyrannical, antiquated stipulation by any penalty of the law. It would be better to fight it out once for all. All the sense of the kingdom would be with him, and he did not believe that any judge could pronounce against him. Here Symington called, with a slight tone of anxiety, "We are all ready, my lord, and waiting." This almost decided Walter. He turned from the beach, and made a few hasty steps up the slope.

But then he paused again, and turning round faced once more the darkening water, the boat lying like a shadow upon the beach, the vague figures of the men about it. The ferry-boat had pushed off and was lumbering over the water with great oars going like bats' wings, and a noisy human load. The other little vessel with that girl had almost disappeared. He thought he could see in the darkness a white speck like a bird, which was the white shawl that wrapped her throat and shoulders. Her home lay somewhere in the centre of these dark waters, a curious nest for such a creature. And his? He turned again towards the dark, half-seen towers and gables. Some of them were so irregular in outline that they could be nothing but ruins. He began to think of the past, mute, out of date, harmless to affect the life that had replaced it, which had taken refuge there. And he remembered his own argument about the courtesy that the living owed to the dead. Well! if it was so, if it was as a

politeness, a courtesy to the past, it might be unworthy a gentleman to refuse it. And perhaps when all was said it was just a little cowardly to turn one's back upon a possible danger, upon what at least the vulgar thought a danger. This decided him. He turned once more, and with a few rapid steps reached the boat. Next moment they were afloat upon the dark loch. There had been no wind to speak of on shore, but the boat was soon struggling against a strong running current, and a breeze which was like ice. The boatmen showed dark against the gleaming loch, the rude little vessel rolled, the wind blew. In front of them rose the dark towers and woods all black without a sign of human habitation. Walter felt his heart rise at last with the sense of adventure. It was the strangest way of entering upon a fine inheritance.

CHAPTER X.

KINLOCH HOURAN CASTLE stands out of the very waters of Loch Houran, with its ruined gables and towers clothed with ivy. From the water it looked like nothing but a roofless and deserted ruin. One tower in the centre stood up above the jagged lines of the walls, with something that looked like a ruined balcony or terrace commanding the landscape. The outline was indistinct, for the trees that had got footing in the ruined chambers below grew high and wild, veiling the means by which it was sustained at that altitude: but the little platform itself was very visible, surrounding the solid block of the tower, which showed no window or opening, but looked as if it might yet outlive centuries. As the boat approached, Walter saw the rowers whisper, and give significant looks at Symington, who sat respectfully on one of the cross seats, not to put himself in the way of his master, who occupied the other alone. Hoarse whispers breathed about the other end of the boat, and Symington was progged in the shoulders with an occasional oar. "Will ye no' be letting him see't?" the rowers said. Walter's

faculties were eagerly acute in the strangeness of everything around him; the sense that he was going to an impossible house—to a ruin—on an impossible errand, seemed to keep him on the alert in every particular of his being. He could see through the dusk, he could hear through the whistle of the wind and the lashing of the water upon the boat's side, which was like the roar of a mimic storm; and he was not even insensible to the comic element in Symington's face, who waved away the oar with which he was poked, and replied with words and frowns and looks full of such superiority of information, that a burst of sudden nervous laughter at the sight relieved Walter's excitement. He felt that a thrill of disapproval at this went through the boat, and the men in the bow shook their bonnets as they rowed.

"It's nothing to laugh at, my lord," said old Symington, "though I'm not one—and I make no question but your lordship is not one—to lose my presence o' mind. Yon's the phenomenon that they wanted me to call your lordship's attention to," he added, jerking his arm, but without turning his head, in the direction of the tower.

"The light?" Walter said. He had been about to ask what the meaning of it might be. It had not been visible at all when they started, but for the last moment or two had been growing steadily. The daylight was waning every minute, and no doubt (he thought) it was this that made the light more evident.

It shone from the balcony or high roof-terrace which surrounded the old tower. It was difficult to distinguish what it was, or identify any lamp or beacon as the origin of it. It seemed to come from the terrace generally, a soft, extended light, with nothing fiery in it, no appearance of any blaze or burning, but a motionless, clear shining, which threw a strange glimmer upwards upon the solid mass of the tower, and downwards upon the foliage, which was black and glistening, and upon the surface of the water. "Yon's the phenomenon," said Symington, pointing with a jerk of his elbow. The light brought out the whole mass of rugged masonry and trees from the rest of the landscape, and softly defined it against the darker background.

"How is it done?" said the young man, simply. He perceived the moment after that his tone was like that of the bagman on the coach, and shivered at the thought. So soft and steady was the light that it had not seemed to him extraordinary at all.

"What do you mean by a phenomenon?" he asked, hastily. He remembered suddenly that the young lady on the coach had spoken of this light, and taken it, so to speak, under her protection.

"If your lordship has ainy desire to inquire into my opinion," said old Symington, "though I doubt that's little likely, I would say it was just intended to work on the imagination. Now and then, indeed, it's useful in the way of a sign—like a person waving to you to

come and speak; but to work on the imagination, that's what I would say."

Walter looked up at the light which threw a faint glimmer across the dark water, showing the blackness of the roughened ripple, over which they were making their way, and bringing into curious prominence the dark mass of the building rising out of it. It was not like the moon, it was more distinct than starlight, it was paler than a torch: nor was there any apparent central point from which it came. There was no electric light in those days, nor was Loch Houran a probable spot for its introduction: but the clear colourless light was of that description. It filled the visitor with a vague curiosity, but nothing more.

"To work on—whose imagination? and with what object?" he said.

But as he asked the question the boat shot forward into the narrow part of the loch, and rounded the corner of the ruin. Anything more hopeless as a place to which living passengers, with the usual encumbrances of luggage, were going, could not well be conceived; but after a few minutes' rowing, the boat ran in to some rude steps on the other side of the castle, where there were traces of a path leading up across the rough grass to a partially visible door. All was so dark by this time that it was with difficulty that Walter found the landing; when he had got ashore, and his portmanteau had been put out on the bank, the men in the boat pushed off with an energy and

readiness which proved their satisfaction in getting clear of the castle and its traditions. To find himself left there, with an apparently ruined house behind him, his property at his feet, his old servant by his side, night closing in around, and the dark glistening water lapping up on the stones at his feet, was about as forlorn a situation as could be imagined.

"Are we to pass the night here?" he said, in a voice which could not help being somewhat querulous.

The sound of a door opening behind interrupted his words, and turning round he saw an old man standing in the doorway, with a small lamp in his hand. He held it up high over his head to see who the new-comers were; and Walter, looking round, saw a bowed and aged figure—a pale old face, which might have been made out of ivory, so bloodless was it, the forehead polished and shining, some grey locks escaping at the side of a black skull-cap, and eyes looking out keenly into the darkness.

"It is just his lordship, Macalister," said old Symington.

The young man, who was so strange to it all, stood with a sort of helplessness between the two old men who were familiar with each other and the place and all its customs.

"Come away, then, come away," cried the guardian of the house, with a shrill voice that penetrated the stillness sharply. "What are ye biding there for in the dark?"

"And who's to carry up my lord's portmanteau?" said Symington.

"His portmanteau!" cried the other, with a sort of eldritch laugh. "Has he come to bide?"

This colloquy held over him exasperated Walter, and he seized the portmanteau hastily, forgetting his dignity.

"Lend a hand, Symington, and let us have no more talk," he said.

There is a moment when the most forlorn sensations and the most dismal circumstances become either ludicrous or irritating. The young man shook off his sense of oppression and repugnance as he hastened up the slope to the door, while the lantern, flashing fitfully about, showed now the broken path, now the rough red masonry of the ruin, which was scarcely less unlike a ruin on this side than on the other. The door gave admittance into a narrow passage only, out of which a spiral staircase ascended close to the entrance, the passage itself apparently leading away into the darkness to a considerable distance. At the end of it stood a woman with a lighted candle peering out at the stranger as the man had done. He seemed to realise the stories which every one has read of a belated traveller unwillingly received into some desolate inn, which turns out to be the headquarters of a robber-band, and where the intruder must be murdered ere the morning.

"This is your way, my lord," said the shrill old man, leading the way up the spiral stair. The whole scene

was like a picture. The woman holding up her light at the end of the long passage, the old man with his lamp, the dark corners full of silence and mystery, the cold wind blowing as through an icy ravine. And the sensations of the young man, who had not even had those experiences of adventure which most young men have in these travelling days, whom poverty and idleness had kept at home in tame domestic comfort, were very strange and novel. He seemed to himself to be walking into a romance, not into any real place, but into some old storybook, a mystery of Udolpho, an antiquated and conventional region of gloom and artificial alarms.

"Come this way, my lord; come this way," said the old man; "the steps are a bit worn, for they're auld, auld—as auld as the house. But we hope you'll find everything as comfortable as the circumstances will permit. We have had just twa three days to prepare, my mistress and me; but we've done our best, as far," he added, "as the circumstances will permit. This way, this way, my lord."

At the head of the stair everything was black as night. The old man's lamp threw his own somewhat fantastic shadow upon the wall of a narrow corridor as he held it up to guide the new-comer. Close to the top of the staircase, however, there opened a door, through which a warm light was showing, and Walter, to his surprise, found himself in a comfortably-furnished room with a cheerful fire, and a table covered for

dinner, a welcome end to the discomfort and gloom of the arrival. The room was low, but large, and there were candles on the mantelpiece and table which made a sort of twinkling illumination in the midst of the dark panelled walls and dark furniture. The room was lined with books at one end. It was furnished with comfortable sofas and chairs of modern manufacture. There was a curious dim mirror over the mantelshelf in a heavy gilt frame of old carving, one or two dim old portraits hung opposite, the curtains were drawn, the fire was bright, the white tablecloth with an old-fashioned silver vase in the middle, and the candles burning, made a cheerful centre of light. At the further end was another door, open, which admitted to a bed-room, dim, but comfortable in the firelight. All this was encouraging. Walter threw himself into a chair with a sense that the situation altogether was improving. Things cannot be so very bad when there is a fire and lights, and a prospect of dinner. He began to laugh at himself, when he had taken off his coat, and felt the warmth of the glowing fire. Everything around him was adapted for comfort. There was a little want of light which left all the corners mysterious, and showed the portraits dimly, like half-seen spectators, looking down from the wall; but the comfortable was much more present than the weird and uncanny which had so much predominated on his arrival. And when a dinner, which was very good and carefully cooked, and a bottle of wine, which, though he had not very much

skill in that subject, Walter knew to be costly and fine, had been served with noiseless care by Symington, the young man began to recover his spirits, and to think of the tradition which required his presence here, as silly indeed, but without harm. After dinner he seated himself by the fire to think over the whole matter. It was not yet a fortnight since this momentous change had happened in his life. Before that he had been without importance, without use in the world, with little hope, with nothing he cared for sufficiently to induce him to exert himself one way or another. Now after he had passed this curious probation, whatever it was, what a life opened before him! He did not even know how important it was, how much worth living. It shone before him indistinctly as a sort of vague, general realisation of all dreams. Wealth—that was the least of it; power to do whatever he pleased; to affect other people's lives, to choose for himself almost whatever pleased him. He thought of Parliament, even of government, in his ignorance: he thought of travel, he thought of great houses full of gaiety and life. It was not as yet sufficiently realised to make him decide on one thing or another. He preferred it as it was, vague —an indefinite mass of good things and glories to come. Only this ordeal, or whatever it was—those few days more or less that he was bound to remain at Kinloch Houran, stood between him and his magnificent career. And after all, Kinloch Houran was nothing very terrible. It might be like the mysteries of Udolpho outside; but

all the mysteries of Udolpho turned out, he remembered, quite explainable, and not so very alarming after all; and these rooms, which bore the traces of having been lived in very lately, and which were quite adapted to be lived in, did not seem to afford much scope for the mysterious. There were certain points, indeed, in which they were defective, a want of air, something which occasionally caught at his respiration, and gave him a sort of choked and stifled sensation; but that was natural enough, so carefully closed as everything was, curtains drawn, every draught warded off. Sometimes he had an uneasy feeling as if somebody had come in behind him and was hanging about the back of his chair. On one occasion he even went so far as to ask sharply, "Is it you, Symington?" but, looking back, was ashamed of himself, for of course there was nobody there. He changed his seat, however, so as to face the door, and even went the length of opening it, and looking out to see if there was any one about. The little corridor seemed to ramble away into a darkness so great that the light of his candle did no more than touch its surface—the spiral staircase looked like a well of gloom. This made him shiver slightly, and a half-wish to lock his door came over him, of which he felt ashamed as he turned back into the cheerful light.

After all, it was nothing but the sensation of loneliness which made this impression. He went back to his chair and once more resumed his thoughts—or rather was it not his thoughts—nay, his fancies—that

resumed him, and fluttered about and around, presenting to him a hundred swiftly changing scenes? He saw visions of his old life, detached scenes which came suddenly up through the darkness and presented themselves before him—a bit of Sloebury High Street, with a group of his former acquaintances now so entirely separated from him; the little drawing-room at the cottage, with Julia Herbert singing him a song; Underwood's rooms on that particular night when he had gone in, in search of something like excitement, and had found everything so dull and flat. None of these scenes had any connection with his new beginning in life. They all belonged to the past, which was so entirely past and over. But these were the scenes which came with a sort of perversity, all broken, changing like badly managed views in a magic lantern, produced before him without any will of his. There was a sort of bewildering effect in the way in which they swept along, one effacing another, all of them so alien to the scene in which he found himself. He had to get up at last, shaking himself as free of the curious whirl of unwonted imagination as he could. No doubt his imagination was excited; but happily not, he said to himself, by anything connected with the present scene in which he found himself. Had it been roused by these strange surroundings, by the darkness and silence that were about him, by the loneliness to which he was so unused, he felt that there was no telling what he might see or think he saw; but fortunately

it was not in this way that his imagination worked. His pulse was quick, however, his heart beating, a quite involuntary excitement in all his bodily faculties. He got up hastily and went to the bookshelves, where he found, to his surprise, a large collection of novels and light literature. It seemed to Walter that his predecessor, whom he had never seen—the former Lord Erradeen, who inhabited these rooms not very long ago —had been probably, like himself, anxious to quench the rising of his fancy in the less exciting course of a fictitious drama, the conventional excitements of a story. He looked over the shelves with a curious sympathy for this unknown person, whom indeed he had never thought much upon before. Did that unknown know who was to succeed him? Did he ever speculate upon Walter as Walter was now doing upon him? He turned over the books with a strange sense of examining the secrets of his predecessor's mind. They were almost all books of adventure and excitement. He took down, after a moment, a volume of Dumas, and returned to his easy-chair by the fire, to lose himself in the breathless ride of d'Artagnan and the luckless fortunes of the three companions. It answered the purpose admirably. A sudden lull came over his restless fancy. He was in great comfort externally, warmed and fed and reposing after a somewhat weary day, and the spell of the great story-teller got hold of him. He was startled out of this equable calm when Symington came in to light the candles in his bed-room and bring

hot water, and offer his services generally. Symington regarded him with an approval which he did not think it worth his while to dissemble.

"That's right, my lord, that's right," he said. "Reading's a very fine thing when you have too much to occupy your thoughts."

Walter was amused by this deliverance, and happily not impatient of it. "That is a new reason for reading," he said.

"But it is a real just one, if your lordship will permit me to say so. Keep you to your book, my lord; it's just fine for putting other things out of your head. It's Dumas's you're reading? I've tried that French fellow myself, but I cannot say that I made head or tail of him. He would have it that all that has happened in history was just at the mercy of a wheen adventurers, two or three vagrants of Frenchmen. No, no. I may believe a great deal, but I'm not likely to believe that."

"I see you are a critic, Symington; and do you read for the same reason that you have been suggesting to me?—because you have too much to occupy your thoughts?"

"Well, pairtly, my lord, and pairtly just in my idle hours to pass the time. I have made up your fire and lighted the candles, and everything is in order. Will I wait upon your lordship till you're inclined for your bed? or will I——" Symington made a significant pause, which it was not very difficult to interpret.

"You need not wait," Walter said; and then, with an instinct which he was half ashamed of, he asked hurriedly, "Whereabouts do you sleep?"

"That is just about the difficulty," said old Symington. "I'm rather out of call if your lordship should want anything. The only way will just be to come down the stairs, if your lordship will take the trouble, and ring the big bell. It would waken a' the seven sleepers if it was rung at their lug: and I'm not so ill to waken when there is noise enough. But ye have everything to your hand, my lord. If you'll just give a glance into the other room, I can let you see where everything is. There is the spirit-lamp, not to say a small kettle by the fire, and there's——"

"That will do," said Walter. "I shall not want anything more to-night."

The old servant went away with a glance round the room, in which Walter thought there was some anxiety, and stopped again at the door to say "Good night, my lord. It's not that I am keen for my bed—if your lordship would like me to bide, or even to take a doze upon a chair——"

"Go to bed, old Sym.," said the young man with a laugh. The idea of finding a protector in Symington was somewhat ludicrous. But these interruptions disturbed him once more, and brought back his excitement: he felt a sort of pang as he heard the old servant's heavy step going down the winding stair, and echoing far away, as it seemed, into the bowels of the earth.

Then that extreme and blighting silence which is like a sort of conscious death came upon the place. The thick curtains shut out every sound of wind and water outside as they shut out every glimpse of light. Walter heard his pulse in his ears, his heart thumping like the hammer of a machine. The whole universe seemed concentrated in that only living breathing thing, which was himself. He tried to resume his book, but the spell of the story was broken. He could no longer follow the fortunes of Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. Walter Methven thrust himself in front of these personages, and, though he was not half so amusing, claimed a superior importance by right of those pulses that clanged in his head like drums beating. He said to himself that he was very comfortable, that he had never expected to be so well off. But he could not regain his composure or sense of well-being. It was a little better when he went into his bed-room, the mere movement and passage from one room to another being of use to him. The sense of oppression and stagnation, however, soon became almost greater here than in the sitting-room. One side of the room was entirely draped in close-drawn curtains, so that it was impossible to make out even where the windows were. He drew them aside with some trouble, for the draperies were very heavy, but not to much advantage. At first it seemed to him that there were no windows at all; then he caught sight of something like a recess high in the wall; and climbing up, found the hasp of a rough

shutter, which covered a small square window built into a cave of the deep masonry. That this should be the only means of lighting an almost luxurious sleeping chamber, bewildered him more and more; but it would not open, and let in no air, and the atmosphere felt more stifling than ever in this revelation of the impossibility of renewing it. Finally, he went to bed with a sort of rueful sense that there was the last citadel and refuge of a stranger beset by imaginations in so weird and mysterious a place. He did not expect to sleep, but he determined that he would not, at least, be the sport of his own fancies.

It astonished Walter beyond measure to find himself waking in broad daylight, with Symington moving softly about the room, and a long window, the existence of which he had never suspected, facing him as he looked up from his pillows, after a comfortable night's sleep. Mingled shame and amusement made him burst into an uneasy laugh, as he realised this exceedingly easy end of his tribulations.

"Mrs. Macalister," said Symington, "would like well to know when your lordship is likely to be ready, to put down the trout at the right moment: for it's an awful pity to spoil a Loch Houran trout."

CHAPTER XI.

To insist upon the difference between an impression made when we arrive, tired and excited at night, in a strange place, and that which the same scene produces in the early freshness and new life of the morning, would be to deliver ourselves over to the reign of the truism. It would, however, have been impossible to feel this with more force than Walter felt it. His sensations of alarm and excitement struck him not only as unjustifiable but ludicrous. He laughed once more when he came out of his chamber into the warm and genial room, which had seemed to him so mysterious and dark on the previous night. There were windows upon either side of the fire-place, each in a deep recess like a small room, so great was the thickness of the wall. They looked out upon the mountains, upon the narrow end of the loch, all bubbling and sparkling in the sunshine, and down upon the little grassy slope rough and uncared for, yet green, which was the only practicable entrance to the castle. The windows were not large, and the room still not very light, though the sunshine which poured in at one side made a most picturesque effect of light and shade. The portraits on the wall were better than

they had seemed, and had lost the inquisitive air of dissatisfied inspection which Walter's imagination had given them. The book-shelves at the end gave relief to the room, with their cheerful gilding and the subdued tone of their bindings. Walter thought of the chamber in the *Pilgrim's Progress* turned towards the sunrising, the name of which was Peace. But peace was not the thing most suggested at Kinloch Houran by any of the accessories about, and a vision of the chilliness of the gray light in the afternoon, and the force of the east wind when it came, crossed his mind in true nineteenth century criticism of the more poetical view. But in the mean time, the policy of enjoying the present was undeniable, especially when that present took the form of a Loch Houran trout, fresh from the water, and cooked as fish only are under such conditions. He looked back upon the agitations of the evening, and the reluctant angry sentiment with which he had come to this old house of his family, with amused incredulity and shame. To think that he could be such an impressionable fool! He dismissed it all lightly from his mind as he hurried over his breakfast, with the intention of getting out at once and exploring everything about. He had even newspapers upon his table along with the fresh scones, the new-made butter, all the fresh provisions of the meal. To be sure, it was Glasgow and not London from which they came—but the world's history was no less instant in them, flashing from all parts of the world into this home of the ancient ages.

His first inspection was of the castle itself, which he undertook under the auspices of old Symington and old Macalister, both eager to explain and describe what it had been, as well as what it was. What it was did not consist of very much. "My lord's rooms," those in which he had spent the night, were the only habitable portion of the great pile. He was led through the roofless hall, with its musicians' gallery still perched high up and overshadowed with canopies of ashen boughs, vigorous though leafless; the guard-room, the supposed kitchen with its large chimney, the oblong space from east to west which was supposed to have been the chapel. All was a little incoherent in the completeness of ruin. There was little of the stimulation of family pride to be got out of those desolate places. The destruction was too complete to leave room even for the facile web of imagination. The Crusader, about whom there was a legend a little too picturesque and romantic to be true, or the lady who was only saved by his sudden appearance from unfaithfulness, were not more easy to conjure up within the inclosure of those shapeless walls than on any unremarkable spot where the story might have been told. Walter grew a little weary as Symington and the old guardian of the house argued as to which was this division of the castle, and which that. He left them discussing the question, and climbed up by a rude stair which had been half improvised from the ruined projections of the masonry, to the crumbling battle-

ments above. From thence he looked down upon a scene which was older than the oldest ruin, yet ever fresh in perennial youth: the loch stretched out like a great mirror under the wintry blue of the sky and the dazzling blaze of the sunshine, reflecting everything, every speck of cloud above and every feathery twig and minute island below. There was no need to make believe, to simulate unfelt enthusiasm, or endeavour to connect with unreal associations this wonderful and glorious scene. Perhaps there was in his mind something more in harmony with the radiance of nature than with the broken fragments of a history which he had no skill to piece up into life again. He stood gazing upon the scene in a rapture of silent delight. The hills in their robes of velvet softness, ethereal air-garments more lovely than any tissue ever woven in mortal loom, drew aside on either hand in the blue space and dazzling atmosphere to open out this liquid vale of light, with its dark specks of islets, its feathery banks, all rustling with leafless trees. Every outline and detail within its reach was turned into a line, a touch, more sweet by the flattering glory of the still water in which everything was double. The morning freshness and sheen were still unbroken. It was like a new creation lying contemplating itself in the first ecstasy of consciousness. Walter was gazing upon this wonderful scene when the sharp voice of old Macalister made him start, and take a step aside which almost had serious consequences: for he stepped back unwarily

upon the crumbling wall, and might have fallen but for the violent grip of the old man, who clutched him like a shaky Hercules, with a grasp which was vigorous yet trembling.

"Lord's sake take care," he cried. His face flushed, then paled again with genuine emotion. "Do you think we have a store of young lads like you, that you will risk your life like yon? and just in the place where the lady fell. You have given me such a start I canna breathe," he cried.

To tell the truth, looking back upon it, Walter himself did not like the look of the precipice which he had escaped.

"Where the lady fell?" he asked with a little eagerness, as he came to the battlement.

"Oh ay. I seldom bother my head about what's happened, so to speak, two or three days since. It was just there she fell. She has been bedridden ever since, from a' I hear, which just shows the folly of venturing about an auld place without somebody that knows how to take care of ye. What would have come of you yoursel', that is the maister of a', if auld Sandy Macalister had not been there?"

"Thank you, Macalister, you shall find me grateful," said Walter; "but who was this lady? two or three days ago, did you say?"

"Years—years; did I no say years? Oh ay, it may be longer, twenty or thirty. I'm meaning just naething in a life like mine. She had some silly story of being

frightened with a gentleman that she thought she saw. They are keen about making up a story—women folk. She was just the sister to the man of business, ye'll have heard of her—a pretty bit thing, if that was of any consequence; but, Lord's sake, what's that atween you and me, and you ignorant of everything?" the old man said. "Do you see the chimneys yonder, and the gable end with the crow steps, as they call it, just pushing out among the trees? That's just your ain shooting-box—they call it Auchnasheen. I'll tell you the meanings of the names another time. Out beyond yonder, the big house away at the point, it's a new place built for his diversion by one of your new men. Yon island far away that's bare and green is the island of Rest, where all the loch was once buried: and atween us and that there's another isle with a gable end among the trees which is just the last place that's left to an auld race to plant their feet upon. It's a bonnie piece of water; you that's come from the south you'll never have seen the like. I'll tell you all the stories of the divers places, and how they're connected with the Me'vens that are chiefs of Loch Houran; for I wouldna give a button for that new-fangled title of the Lords Erradeen."

"It has lasted however for some centuries," said Walter, with a sudden sense of displeasure which he felt to be absurd enough.

"And what is that in a family?" said old Macalister, "I think nothing of it. A hundred years or two that never counts one way nor another; it's nae antiquity.

If that nonsense were true about the Warlock lord, he would be but twa hundred and fifty at the present speaking, or thereabouts, and a' that have ever thought they saw him represent him as a fine personable man. I have never had that pleasure myself," the old man said with his shrill laugh. "Where are you going, my young gentleman? Ye'll just go down like a stane and end in a rattle of dust and mortar, if you'll no be guided by me."

"Let you his lordship alone, Sandy," cried the voice of Symington, intermingled with pants and sobs as he climbed up to the parapet. "Ye must not occupy my lord's time with your old craiks. You would perhaps like, my lord, to visit Auchnasheen, where the keeper will be on the outlook: or may be it would be better to organise your day's shooting for to-morrow, when you have lookit a little about you: or ye would perhaps like to take a look at the environs, or see the factor, who is very anxious as soon as your lordship has a moment—"

"Oh! and there is the minister that can tell ye a' about the antiquities, my lord: and traces out the auld outline of the castle grandly, till ye seem to see it in all its glory—"

"Or—" Symington had begun, when Walter turned at bay. He faced the old men with a half-laughing defiance. "I see plenty of boats about," he said. "I am going out to explore the loch. I want no attendance, or any help, but that you will be good enough to leave me to myself."

"We'll do that, my lord. I will just run and cry upon Duncan that is waiting about—"

The end of all this zeal and activity was that when Walter found himself at last free and on the shining bosom of the loch, he was in a boat too heavy for his own sole management, sharing the care of it with Duncan, who was of a taciturn disposition and answered only when spoken to. This made the arrangement almost as satisfactory as if he had been alone, for Duncan was quite willing to obey and yield a hearty service without disturbing his young master with either questions or remarks. He was a large young man, strong and well knit though somewhat heavy, with a broad smiling face, red and freckled, with honest blue eyes under sandy eyelashes, and a profusion of strong and curly reddish hair. He beamed upon Lord Erradeen with a sort of friendly admiration and awe, answering, "Ay, my lord," and "No, my lord," always with the same smile of general benevolence and readiness to comply with every desire. When they had got beyond hail of the castle, from which Symington and Macalister watched them anxiously, Duncan mutely suggested the elevation of a mast and setting of the sail which the vessel was furnished with, to which Walter assented with eagerness: and soon they were skimming along before a light wind as if they had wings. And now began perhaps the most pleasurable expedition that Walter had ever made in his life. Escaped from the ruinous old pile, within which he had feared he knew

not what, escaped too from the observation and inspection of the two old men so much better acquainted with the history of his family than himself, whom he felt to be something between keepers and schoolmasters—fairly launched forth upon the world, with nothing to consult but his own pleasure, Walter felt his spirits rise to any height of adventure. There was not indeed any very wild adventure probable, but he was not much used to anything of the kind, and the sense of freedom and freshness in everything was intoxicating to the young man. The small boat, the rag of a sail, the lively wind that drove them along, the rushing ripple under their keel, all delighted him. He held the helm with a sense of pleasure almost beyond anything he had ever known, feeling all the exhilaration of a discoverer in a new country, and for the first time the master of himself and his fate. Duncan said nothing, but grinned from ear to ear, when the young master in his inattention to, or to tell the truth ignorance of, the capabilities of the boat, turned the helm sharply, bringing her up to the wind in such a way as to threaten the most summary end for the voyage. He kept his eye upon the rash steersman, and Walter was not aware of the risks he ran. He directed his little vessel now here, now there, with absolute enjoyment, running in close ashore to examine the village, turning about again in a wild elation to visit an island, running the very nose of the boat into the rocky banks or feathery bushwood. How it was that no harm came as they thus darted from

point to point Duncan never knew. He stood up roused to watchfulness, with his eyes intent on the movements of his master ready to remedy any indiscretion. It was in the nature of such undeserved vigilance that the object of it was never aware of it, but to be sure Duncan had his own life to think of too.

They had thus swept triumphantly down the loch, the wind favouring, and apparently watching over the rash voyager as carefully, as and still more disinterestedly than Duncan. The motion, the air, the restless career, the novelty, and the freedom enchanted Walter. He felt like a boy in his first escapade, with an intoxicating sense of independence and scorn of danger which gave zest to the independence. At every new zigzag he made, Duncan but grinned the more. He uttered the Gaelic name of every point and isle, briefly, with guttural depth, out of his chest, as they went careering along before the wind. The boat was like an inquisitive visitor, too open for a spy, poking in to every corner. At length they came to an island standing high out of the water, with a rocky beach, upon which a boat lay carefully hauled up, and a feathery crest of trees, fine clumps of fir, fringed and surrounded by a luxuriant growth of lighter wood. In the midst of this fine network of branches, such as we call bare, being leafless, but which in reality are all astir with life restrained, brown purple buddings eager to start and held in like hounds in a leash—rose the solid outline of a house, built upon the

ridge of rock, and appearing like a shadow in the midst of all the anatomy of the trees.

"That will be joost the leddy's," cried Duncan; at which Walter's heart, so light in his bosom, gave an additional leap of pleasure. He steered it so close that Duncan's vigilance was doubly taxed, for the least neglect would have sent the little vessel ashore. Walter examined the little landing, the rocky path that led up the bank, winding among the trees, and as much as could be made out of the house, with keen interest. The man with the red shirt, who had been the young lady's boatman on the previous day, appeared at the further point as they went on. He was fishing from a rock that projected into the water, and turning to gaze upon the unwary boat, with astonished eyes, shouted something in Gaelic to Duncan, who nodded good-humouredly a great many times, and replied with a laugh in the same tongue—

"Yon will joost be Hamish," said Duncan.

"What is he saying?" cried Walter.

"He will just be telling us to mind where we are going," said Duncan, imperturbable.

"Tell him to mind his own business," cried Walter, with a laugh. "And who is Hamish, and who is the leddy? Come, tell me all about it." His interest in the voyage flagged a little at this point.

Duncan thus interrogated was more put to it than by the dangerous course they had hitherto been running.

"It will joost be the leddy," he said; "and Hamish

that's her man: and they will joost be living up there like ither persons, and fearing God: fery decent folk—oh, joost fery decent folk."

"I never doubted that. But who are they, and what are they? And do you mean to say they *live* there, on that rock, in winter, so far north?"

Walter looked up at the dazzling sky, and repented his insinuation: but he was, alas, no better than an Englishman, when all was said, and he could not help a slight shiver as he looked back. Hamish, who had made a fine point of colour on his projecting rock, had gone from that point, and was visible in his red shirt mounting the high crest of the island with hurried appearances and disappearances as the broken nature of the ground made necessary. He had gone, there seemed little doubt, to intimate to the inhabitants the appearance of the stranger. This gave Walter a new thrill of pleasure, but it took away his eagerness about the scenery. He lay back languidly, neglecting the helm, and as he distracted Duncan's attention too, they had nearly run aground on the low beach of the next island. When this difficulty was got over, Walter suddenly discovered that they had gone far enough, and might as well be making their way homeward, which was more easily said than done; for the wind, which had hitherto served their purpose nobly, was no longer their friend. They made a tack or two, and crept along a little, but afterwards resigned themselves to ship the sail and take to the oars, which was not so

exhilarating nor so well adapted to show the beauty of the landscape. It took them some time to make their way once more past the rocky point, and along the edge of the island which attracted Walter's deepest interest, but to which he could not persuade Duncan to give any name.

"It will joost be the leddy's," the boatman insisted on saying, with a beaming face; but either his English or his knowledge was at fault, and he went no further.

Walter's heart beat with a kind of happy anxiety, a keen but pleasant suspense, as he swept his oar out of the water, and glanced behind him to measure how near they were to the landing, at which he had a presentiment something more interesting than Hamish might be seen. And as it turned out, he had not deceived himself. But what he saw was not what he expected to see.

The lady on the bank was not his fellow-traveller of yesterday. She was what Walter to himself, with much disappointment, called an old lady, wrapped in a large furred mantle and white fleecy wrap about her head and shoulders. She stood and waved her hand as Walter's boat came slowly within range.

"You will be joost the leddy," said Duncan of the few words; and with one great sweep of his oar he turned the boat towards the landing. It was the man's doing, not the master's; but the master was not sorry to take advantage of this sudden guidance. It was all done in a moment, without intention. Hamish stood

ready to secure the boat, and before he had time to think, Walter found himself on the little clearing above the stony bit of beach, hat in hand, glowing with surprise and pleasure, and receiving the warmest of welcomes.

"You will forgive me for just stopping you on your way," the lady said; "but I was fain to see you, Lord Erradeen, for your father and I were children together. I was Violet Montrose. You must have heard him speak of me."

"I hope," said Walter, with his best bow, and most ingratiating tone, "that you will not consider it any fault of mine; but I don't remember my father; he died when I was a child."

"Dear me," cried the lady; "how could I be so foolish! Looking at you again, I see you would not be old enough for that: and, now I remember, he married late, and died soon after. Well, there is no harm done. We are just country neighbours, and as I was great friends with Walter Methven some five-and-forty years ago——"

"I hope," said the young man with a bow and smile, "that you will be so good as to be friends with Walter Methven now: for that is the name under which I know myself."

"Oh, Lord Erradeen," the lady said with a little flutter of pleasure. Such a speech would be pretty from any young man; but made by a young lord, in all the flush of his novel honours, and by far the greatest

potentate of the district, there was no one up the loch or down the loch who would not have been gratified. "It is just possible," she said, after a momentary pause, "that having been brought up in England, and deprived of your father so early, you may not know much about your neighbours, nor even who we are, in this bit island of ours. We are the Forresters of Eaglescairn, whom no doubt ye have heard of; and I am one of the last of the Montroses—alas! that I should say so. I have but one of a large family left with me; and Oona and me, we have just taken advantage of an old family relic that came from my side of the house, and have taken up our habitation here. I hear she must have travelled with you yesterday on the coach, not thinking who it was. Oh, yes; news travels fast at this distance from the world. I think the wind blows it, or the water carries it. All the loch by this time is aware of Lord Erradeen's arrival. Indeed," she added, with a little laugh, "you know, my lord, we all saw the light."

She was a woman over fifty, but fair and slight, with a willowy figure, and a complexion of which many a younger woman might have been proud; and there was a little airiness of gesture and tread about her, which probably thirty years before had been the pretty affectations, half-natural, half-artificial, of a beauty, and which still kept up the tradition of fascinating powers. The little toss of her head, the gesture of her hands, as she said the last words, the half-apologetic laugh as if

excusing herself for a semi-absurdity, were all characteristic and amusing.

"You know," she added, "in the Highlands we are allowed to be superstitious," and repeated the little laugh at herself with which she deprecated offence.

"What is it supposed to mean?" Walter asked somewhat eagerly. "Of course there is some natural explanation which will be simple enough. But I prefer to take the old explanation, if I knew what it was."

"And so do we," she said quickly. "We are just ready to swear to it, man and woman of us on the loch. Some say it is a sign the head of the house is coming—some that it is a call to him to come and meet— Dear me, there is Oona calling. And where is Hamish? I will not have the child kept waiting," said the lady, looking round her with a little nervous impatience.

She had begun to lead the way upward by a winding path among the rocks and trees, and now paused, a little breathless, to look down towards the landing-place, and clap her hands impatiently.

"Hamish is away, mem," said the woman whom Walter had seen on the coach, and who now met them coming down the winding path. She looked at him with a cordial smile, and air of kindly welcome. It was evident that it did not occur to Mysie that her salutations might be inappropriate. "You're very welcome, sir, to your ain country," she said with a courtesy, which was polite rather than humble. Walter felt that she would have offered him her hand, on the

smallest encouragement, with a kindly familiarity which conveyed no disrespect.

"You should say my lord, Mysie," her mistress remarked.

"Deed, mem, and so I should; but when you're no much in the way o't, ye get confused. I said, as soon as I heard the news, that it would be the young gentleman on the coach, and I had just a feeling a' the time that it was nae tourist, but a kent face. Hamish is away, mem. I tell him he hears Miss Oona's foot on the bank, before ever she cries upon him; and yonder he is just touching the shore, and her ready to jump in."

The party had reached a little platform on the slope. The path was skilfully engineered between two banks, clothed with ferns and grasses, and still luxuriant with a vivid green, though the overhanging trees were all bare. Here and there a little opening gave a point of repose and extended view. Mrs. Forrester paused and turned round to point out to her visitor the prospect that now lay before them. She was a little breathless and glad of the pause, but it did not suit her character to say so. She pointed round her with a little triumph. They were high enough to see the loch on either side, looking down upon it through the fringe of branches. Opposite to this was the mainland which at that spot formed a little bay, thickly wooded with the dark green of the fir woods, amid which appeared the gables of a sort of ornamental cottage. Nearer the eye was the road, and underneath the road on the beach stood a

little slight figure in the closely-fitting garb which Walter recognised. She had evidently been set down from a waggonette full of a lively party which waited on the high road to see her embark. It was impossible to hear what they were saying, but the air was full of a pleasant murmur of voices.

"It is the young Campbells of Ellermore," said Mrs. Forrester, waving her handkerchief towards the group. "Oona has been spending last night with them, and they have brought her back. They will all be astonished, Mysie, to see me standing here with a gentleman. Dear me, they will all be saying who has Mrs. Forrester got with her?"

"They will think," said Mysie, "just that it's Mr. James or Mr. Ronald come home."

"Ah, Mysie, if that could be!" said the lady of the isle: and she put her hands together, which were thin and white, and ornamented by a number of rings, with a pretty conventional gesture of maternal regret. Walter stood looking on with mingled amazement and pleasure: pleased as if he were at a play with all the new indications of domestic history which were opening to him, and with a sense of enjoyment through all his being. When the girl sprang into the boat, and Hamish, conspicuous in his red shirt, pushed off into the loch, the tumult of good-byes became almost articulate. He laughed to himself under his breath, remembering all the greetings he had heard along the line of railway, the recognitions at every station.

"Your daughter seems to know everybody," he said.

"And how could she help knowing every person," cried Mysie, taking the words, as it were, out of her mistress's mouth, "when she was born and brought up on the loch, and never one to turn her back upon a neebor, gentle or simple, but just adored wherever she goes?"

"Oh, whisht, Mysie, whisht! we are partial," said Mrs. Forrester with her little antiquated graces; and then she invited Lord Erradeen to continue his walk.

It was the full blaze of day, and the view extended as they went higher up to the crest of rock upon which the house was set. It was built of irregular reddish stone, all cropped with lichens where it was visible, but so covered with clinging plants that very little of the walls could be seen. The rustic porch was built something like a bee-hive, with young, slim-growing saplings for its pillars, and chairs placed within its shelter. There were some flower-beds laid out around, in which a few autumn crocuses had struggled into pale bloom—and a number of china roses hung half opened against the sides of the house. The roofs were partly blue slates, that most prosaic of comfortable coverings, and partly the rough red tiles of the country, which shone warm through the naked boughs.

> "Every hardy plant could bear
> Loch Katrine's keen and searching air,"

was garlanded about the house, the little lawn was as green as velvet, the china roses were pale but sweet.

Behind the house were the mossed apple-trees of a primitive orchard among the rocky shelves. It lay smiling in the sun, with the silver mirror of the lake all round, and every tint and outline doubled in the water. From the door the dark old castle of Kinloch Houran stood out against the silent darkness of the hill. Little rocky islets, like a sport of nature, too small to be inhabited by anything bigger than rabbits, lay all reflected in broken lines of rock and brushwood, between Walter's old castle and this romantic house. They were so visible, one to the other, that the mere position seemed to form a link of connection between the inhabitants.

"We cannot but take an interest in you, you see, Lord Erradeen, for we can never get out of sight of you," said Mrs. Forrester.

"And I think the old place looks better from here than any other view I have seen," Walter added almost in the same breath.

They laughed as they spoke together. It was not possible to be more entirely "country neighbours." The young man had a fantastic feeling that it was a sort of flattery to himself that his house should be so entirely the centre of the landscape. He followed the lady into the house with a little reluctance, the scene was so enchanting. Inside, the roofs were low, but the rooms well-sized and comfortable. They were full of curiosities of every kind: weapons from distant countries, trophies of what is called "the chase," hung upon

the wall of the outer hall. The drawing-room was full of articles from India and China, carved ivories, monsters in porcelain, all the wonders that people used to send home before we got Japanese shops at every corner. An air of gentle refinement was everywhere, with something, too, in the many ornaments, little luxuries, and daintinesses which suggested the little *minauderies* of the old beauty, the old-fashioned airs and graces that had been irresistible to a previous generation.

"You will just stay and eat your luncheon with us, Lord Erradeen. I might have been but poor company, an old woman as I'm getting; but, now that Oona is coming, I need not be too modest; for, though there will not be a grand luncheon, there will be company, which is always something. And sit down and tell me something about your father and the lady he married, and where you have been living all this time."

Walter laughed. "Is it all my humble history you want me to tell you?" he said. "It is not very much. I don't remember my father, and the lady he married is — my mother, you know. The best mother —— But I have not been the best of sons. I was an idle fellow, good-for-nothing a little while ago. Nobody knew what was going to come of me. I did nothing but loaf, if you know what that means."

"Ah, that I do," said Mrs. Forrester; "that was just like my Jamie. But now they tell me he is the finest officer——"

Walter paused, but the lady was once more entirely attention, listening with her hands clasped, and her head raised to his with an ingratiating sidelong look. He laughed. "They all made up their minds I was to be good-for-nothing——"

"Yes," murmured Mrs. Forrester, softly, half closing her eyes and shaking her head, "that was just like my Bob—till he took a thought: and now he is planting coffee in Ceylon and doing well. Yes? and then?"

"An old man arrived one evening," said Walter, half laughing, "and told me—that I was Lord Erradeen. And do you know, from that moment nobody, not even I myself, would believe that I had ever loafed or idled or been good for nothing."

There was a pause, in which Walter thought he heard some one move behind him. But no sound reached Mrs. Forrester, who responded eagerly—

"My son, the present Eaglescairn, was just of the same kind," she said, reflectively. She had a comparison ready for every case that could be suggested—"till he came of age. It was in the will that they were to come of age only at twenty five, and till then I had a sore time. Oh, Oona, my dear, is that you? And had you a pleasant evening. Here is young Lord Erradeen that has come in, most kindly, I'm sure, to tell me about his father, that I knew so well. And it appears you met upon the coach yesterday. Come away, my dear, come away! And that was just most

curious that, knowing nothing of one another, you should meet upon the coach."

Oona came in lightly, in her out-door dress. She gave Walter a look which was very friendly. She had paused for a moment at the door, and she had heard his confession. It seemed to Oona that what he said was generous and manly. She was used to forming quick impressions. She had been annoyed when she had heard from Hamish of the visitor, but her mind changed when she heard what he said. She came up to him and held out her hand. The fresh air was in her face, which Walter thought was like the morning, all bright and fresh and full of life. She made him a little curtsey with much gravity, and said in the pretty voice which was so fresh and sweet, and with that novelty of accent which had amused and delighted the young man, "You are welcome to your own country Lord Erradeen."

"Now that is very pretty of you, Oona," cried her mother. "I never thought you would remember to pay your little compliment, as a well-bred person should; for, to tell the truth, she is just too brusque—it is her fault."

"Hamish told me what to say," said Oona, with a glance of provocation. "He is a very well-bred person. He told me I was to bid my lord welcome to his own."

"Oh, my dear, you need not take away the merit of it, as if you had not thought of it yourself," said the

mother, aggrieved; "but run away and take off your hat, and let us have our lunch, for Lord Erradeen has been all the morning on the water and he will be hungry, and you are all blown about with the wind."

The young people exchanged looks, while Mrs. Forrester made her little protest. There was a sort of laughing interchange between them, in which she was mocking and he apologetic. Why, neither could have said. They understood each other, though they by no means clearly understood each what he and she meant. There was to be a little war between them, all in good-humour and good-fellowship, not insipid agreement and politeness. The next hour was, Walter thought, the most pleasant he had ever spent in his life. He had not been ignorant of such enjoyments before. When we said that various mothers in Sloebury had with the first news of his elevation suffered a sudden pang of self-reproach, to think how they had put a stop to certain passages, the end of which might now have been to raise a daughter to the peerage, it must have been understood that Walter was not altogether a novice in the society of women; but this had a new flavour which was delightful to him. It had been pleasant enough in the cottage, when Julia Herbert sang, and on other occasions not necessary to enter into. But on this romantic isle, where the sound of the loch upon the rocks made a soft accompaniment to everything, in a retirement which no vulgar interruption could reach, with the faded beauty on one side,

scarcely able to forget the old pretty mannerisms of conquest even in her real maternal kindness and frank Highland hospitality, and the girl, with her laughing defiance on the other, he felt himself to have entered a new chapter of history. The whole new world into which he had come became visible to him in their conversation. He heard how he himself had been looked for, and how "the whole loch" had known something about him for years before he had ever heard of Loch Houran. "We used to know you as the 'English lad,'" Oona said, with her glance of mischief. All this amused Walter more than words can say. The sun was dropping towards the west before—escorted to the landing-place by both the ladies, and taken leave of as an old friend—he joined the slow-spoken Duncan, and addressed himself to the homeward voyage. Duncan had not been slow of speech in the congenial company of Hamish. They had discussed the new-comer at length, with many a shaft of humour and criticism, during the visit which Duncan had paid to the kitchen. He blushed not now, secure in the stronghold of his unknown tongue, to break off in a witty remark at Walter's expense as he turned to his master his beaming smile of devotion. They set off together, master and man, happy yet regretful, upon their homeward way. And it was a tough row back to Kinloch Houran against the fresh and not too quiet Highland wind.

CHAPTER XII.

THE castle looked more grim and ruined than ever as Walter set foot once more upon the rough grass of the mound behind. He dismissed the smiling Duncan with regret. As he went up to the door, which now stood open, he thought to himself with relief that another day would finish his probation here, and that already it was more than half over; but next moment remembered that the end of his stay at Kinloch Houran would mean also an end of intercourse with his new friends, which gave a different aspect to the matter altogether. At the door of the castle old Macalister was waiting with a look of anxiety.

"Ye'll have had no luncheon," he said, "and here's Mr. Shaw the factor waiting to see ye."

Macalister had not the manners of Symington, and Walter already felt that it was a curious eccentricity on the part of the old man to leave out his title. The factor was seated waiting in the room up-stairs; he was a middle-aged man, with grizzled, reddish locks, the prototype in a higher class of Duncan in the boat. He got up with a cordial friendliness which Walter

began to feel characteristic, but which was also perhaps less respectful than might have been supposed appropriate, to meet him. He had a great deal to say of business which to Walter was still scarcely intelligible. There were leases to renew, and there was some question about a number of crofter families, which seemed to have been debated with the former lord, and to have formed the subject of much discussion.

"There is that question about the crofters at the Truach-Glas," Mr. Shaw said.

"What crofters? or rather what are crofters? and what is the question and where is the Truach-Glas?" Lord Erradeen said.

He pronounced it, alas! Truack, as he still called loch, lock—which made the sensitive natives shudder. Mr. Shaw looked at him with a little disapproval. He felt that the English lad should have been more impressed by his new inheritance, and more anxious to acquire a mastery of all the facts connected with it. If, instead of wandering about the loch all the morning, he had been looking up the details of the business and the boundaries of the estate, and studying the map! But that not being the case, of course there was nothing to be done but to explain.

"I had thought that Mr. Milnathort would have put the needs of the estate more clearly before you. There are several questions to be settled. I don't know what may be your views as to a landlord's duties, Lord Erradeen——"

"I have no views," said Walter; "I am quite impartial. You must recollect that I have only been a landlord for a fortnight."

"But I suppose," said the factor somewhat severely, "that the heir to such a fine property has had some kind of a little training?"

"I have had no training—not the slightest. I had no information even that I was the heir to any property. You must consider me as entirely ignorant, but ready to learn."

Shaw looked at him with some surprise, but severely still. "It is very curious," he said, as if that too had been Walter's fault, "that you did not know you were the heir. We knew very well here; but the late lord was like most people, not very keen about his successor; and then he was a comparatively young man when he died."

"I know nothing of my predecessor," said Walter. "What was the cause of his death? I should like to hear something about him. Several of them must have died young, I suppose, or I, so far off, could never have become the heir."

The factor looked at him keenly, but with doubtful eyes. "There are secrets in all families, my Lord Erradeen," he said.

"Are there? I thought that was rather an old-fashioned sentiment. I don't think, except that I was not always virtuously occupied, that there was any secret in mine."

"And I am sure there is no secret in mine," said Mr. Shaw, energetically; "but then you see I am not, and you were not till a very recent date, Lord Erradeen. There is a kind of something in the race that I will not characterise. It is a kind of a melancholy turn; the vulgar rumours ye will have heard, to which I attach no credence. It is little worth while living in the nineteenth century," the factor said with emphasis, "if ye are to be subject to delusions like that."

"I tell you I am quite ignorant; and, except by hints which I could not understand, Mr. Milnathort did not give me any information. Speak plainly, I want to know what the mystery is; why am I here in this tumble-down old place?" Walter cried with an accent of impatience.

Shaw kept a watchful eye upon him, with the air of a man whom another is trying to deceive.

"It is something in the blood, I'm thinking," the factor said. "They all seem to find out there's a kind of contrariety in life, which is a thing we all must do to be sure, but generally without any fatal effects. After a certain age they all seem to give way to it. I hope that *you*, my lord, being out of the direct line, will escape: the populace—if ye can accept their nonsense —say it's a—well, something supernatural—a kind of an influence from him they call the Warlock Lord.' Shaw laughed, but somewhat uneasily, apologetically. "I think shame to dwell upon such absurdity," he said.

"It does sound very absurd."

"That is just it—nonsense! not worth the consideration of sensible men. And I may say to you, that are, I hope, of a more wholesome mind, that they are terribly given up to caprice in this family. The Truach-Glas crofters have been up and down twenty times. The late lord made up his mind he would let them stay, and then that they must go, and again that he would just leave them their bits of places, and then that he would help them to emigrate; and after all, I had the order that they were to be turned out, bag and baggage. I could not find it in my heart to do it. I just put off, and put off, and here he is dead; and another," said Shaw, with a suppressed tone of satisfaction, "come to the throne. And you're a new man and a young man, and belong to your own century, not to the middle ages," the factor cried with a little vehemence. Then he stopped himself, with a "I beg your pardon, my lord; I am perhaps saying more than I ought to say."

Walter made no reply. He was not sure that he did not think the factor was going too far, for though he knew so little of his family, he already felt that it was something not to be subjected to discussion by common men. These animadversions touched his pride a little; but he was silent, too proud to make any remark. He said, after a pause—

"I don't know that I can give my opinion without a further acquaintance with the facts. If I were to do so

on so slight a knowledge, I fear you might think that a caprice too."

The factor looked at him with a still closer scrutiny, and took the hint. There is nothing upon which it is so necessary to understand the permitted limit of observation as in the discussion of family peculiarities. Though he was so little responsible for this, and even so little acquainted with them, it was impossible that Lord Erradeen should not associate himself with his race. Mr. Shaw got out his papers, and entered upon the questions in which the opinion of the new proprietor was important, without a word further about the late lord and the family characteristics. He explained to Walter at length the position of the crofters, with their small holdings, who in bad seasons got into arrears with their rents, and sometimes became a burden upon the landlord, in whom, so far north, there was some admixture of a Highland chief. The scheme of the estate altogether was of a mixed kind. There were some large sheep farms and extensive moors still intermingled with glens more populated than is usual in these regions. Some of them were on lands but recently acquired, and the crofters in particular were a burden transmitted by purchase, which the father of the last lord had made. It was believed that there had been some covenant in the sale by which the rights of the poor people were secured, but this had fallen into forgetfulness, and there was no reason in law why Lord Erradeen should not exercise all the rights of a pro-

prietor and clear the glen, as so many glens had been cleared. This was the first question that the new lord would have to decide. The humble tenants were all under notice to leave, and indeed were subject to eviction as soon as their landlord pleased. It was with a kind of horror that Walter listened to this account of his new possibilities.

"Eviction!" he said; "do you mean the sort of thing that happens in Ireland?" He held his breath in unfeigned dismay and repugnance. "I thought there was nothing of the sort here."

"Ireland is one thing, and Scotland another," said the factor. "We are a law-abiding people. No man will ever be shot down behind a hedge by a Highlander: so if you should resolve to turn them out to-morrow, my lord, ye need stand in no personal fear."

Walter put aside this somewhat contemptuous assurance with a wave of his hand.

"I have been told of a great many things I could do," he said, "in this last fortnight; but I never knew before that I could turn out a whole village full of people if I chose, and make their houses desolate."

It was a new view altogether of his new powers. He could not help returning in thought to all the prepossessions of his former middle-class existence, where arbitrary power was unknown, and where a mild, general beneficence towards "the poor" was the rule. He said, half to himself, "What would my mother say?" and in the novelty of the idea, half

laughed. What a thrill it would send through the district visitors, the managers of the soup kitchen, all the charitable people! There suddenly came up before him a recollection of many a conversation he had heard, and taken no note of—of consultations how to pay the rent of a poor family here and there, how to stop a cruel landlord's mouth. And that he should appear in the character of a cruel landlord! No doubt it would have been easy to show that the circumstances were quite different. But in the mean time the son of Mrs. Methven could not throw off the traditions in which he had been brought up. He contemplated the whole matter from a point of view altogether different even from that of Mr. Shaw, the factor. Shaw was prepared to prove that on the whole the poor crofters were not such bad tenants, and that sheep farms and deer forests, though more easily dealt with, had some disadvantages too; for there was Paterson of Inverchory that had been nearly ruined by a bad lambing season, and had lost the half of his flock; and as for the shootings, was there not the dreadful example before them of the moors at Finlarig, where everything had been shot down, and the game fairly exterminated by a set of fellows that either did not know what they were doing, or else were making money of it, and not pleasure. The very veins in Shaw's forehead swelled when he spoke of this.

"I would like to have had the ducking of him," he cried; "a man with a grand name and the soul of a

henwife, that swept out the place as if he had done it with a broom, and all for the London market; grant me patience! You will say," added Shaw, "that the thing to do at Inverchory is to get a man with more capital now that John Paterson's tack is done; and that there's few sportsmen like Sir John. That's all very true; but it just shows there are risks to be run in all ways, and the poor folk at Truach-Glas would never lead you into losses like that."

Walter, however, did not pay much attention even to this view. His mind had not room at the moment for Paterson of Inverchory, who was behind with the rent, or Sir John, who had devastated the moors. He did not get beyond the primitive natural horror of what seemed to him an outrage of all natural laws and kindness. He had not been a landowner long enough to feel the sacred right of property. He turn the cottagers out of their poor little homes for the sake of a few pounds more or less of which he stood in no need? The very arguments against taking this step made him angry. Could anybody suppose he could do it? he, Walter Methven! As for the Erradeen business, and all this new affair altogether—good heavens, if anybody thought he would purchase it by that! In short, the young man, who was not born a grand seigneur, boiled up in righteous wrath, and felt it high scorn and shame that it could be supposed of him that he was capable, being rich, of oppressing the poor—

which was the way in which he put it, in his limited middle-class conditions of thought.

Mr. Shaw was half-gratified, half-annoyed by the interview. He said to the minister with whom he stopped to dine, and who was naturally much interested about the new young man, that assuredly the young fellow had a great deal of good in him, but he was a trifle narrow in his way of looking at a question, "which is probably just his English breeding," the factor said. "I would have put the Crofter question before him in all its bearings; but he was just out of himself at the idea of eviction—like what happened in Ireland, he said. I could not get him to go into the philosophy of it. He just would not hear a word. Nothing of the kind had ever come his way before, one could see, and he was just horrified at the thought."

"I don't call that leemited, I call it Christian," the minister said, "and I am not surprised he should have a horror of it. I will go and see him in the morning, if you think it will be well taken, for I'm with him in that, heart and soul."

"Yes, yes, that's all in your way," said Mr. Shaw; "but I am surprised at it in a young man. There is a kind of innocence about it. But I would not wonder after a little if he should change his mind, as others have done."

"Do you form any theory in your own thoughts, Shaw," said the minister, "as to what it is that makes them so apt to change?"

"Not I," cried the factor, with a shrug of his shoulders; and then he added hurriedly, "you've given me a capital dinner, and that whisky is just excellent: but I think I must be going my ways, for already it's later than I thought."

Mr. Cameron, who was minister of the parish, was, like Walter, a stranger to the district and its ways. He was a great antiquary and full of curiosity about all the relics of the past, and he had an enlightened interest in its superstitions too. But Shaw was a Loch Houran man. He had a reverence for the traditions which of course he vowed he did not believe, and though he was very ready to make this statement in his own person he did not like to hear outsiders, as he called the rest of the world, discussing them disrespectfully? So he desired his dog-cart to be "brought round," and drove home in the clear, cold night, warm at his heart, good man, because of the good news for the Crofters, but a little dissatisfied in his mind that the new lord should be doing this simply as a matter of sentiment, and not from a reasonable view of the situation. "Provided even that he keeps of that mind," the factor said to himself.

Walter subsided out of his just indignation when the business part of the interview ended, and he came out to the open air to see Mr. Shaw away.

"This must all be put in order," he said, as he accompanied his visitor to the boat.

Shaw looked at him with a little curiosity mingled with a slight air of alarm.

"Auchnasheen being so near," he said, "which is a very comfortable place, there has never been much notice taken of the old castle."

"But I mean to take a great deal of notice of it," the young man said with a laugh. "I shall have some of the antiquaries down and clear out all the old places."

His laugh seemed to himself to rouse the echoes, but it called forth no responsive sound from his companion, and he caught a glimpse of old Macalister in the distance shaking his old head. This amused yet slightly irritated Walter, in the sense of power which alternated with a sense of novelty and unreality in his mind.

"So you object to that?" he said to the old man. "You don't like your privileges invaded?"

"It's no that," said Macalister; "but ye'll never do it. I've a lang, lang acquaintance with the place, and I've witnessed many a revolution, if I may say sae. One was to pull down the auld wa's altogether; another was to clean it a' out like you. But it's never been done. And it'll never be done. I'm just as sure o' that as your young lordship is that you have a' the power in your hands."

Walter turned away with a little disdain in his laugh. It was not worth while arguing out the matter with Macalister. Who should prevent him from doing what he liked with his old house? He could not but reflect

upon the curious contradictions with which he was beset. He was supposed to be quite capable of turning out a whole village out of their homes, and making them homeless and destitute; but he was not supposed capable of clearing out the blocked-up passage and ooms of an old ruin! He smiled with a kind of scornful indignation as he went up to his sitting-room. By this time the afternoon had lost all light and colour. It was not dark, but neither was it day. A greyness had come into the atmosphere; the shadows were black, and had lost all transparency. The two windows made two bars of a more distinct greyness in the room, with a deep line of shade in the centre between, which was coloured, but scarcely lighted up, by the fire. He could not but think with a sense of relief that the three days which were all he believed that were necessary for his stay at Kinloch Houran were half over at least. Another night and then he would be free to go. He did not mean to go any further than to Auchnasheen, which was exactly opposite to the island; and then, with a smile creeping about the corners of his mouth, he said to himself, that he could very well amuse himself for a few days, what with the shooting and what with——

And it would be comfortable to get out of this place, where the air, he could not tell why, seemed always insufficient. The wainscot, the dark hangings, the heavy old walls, seemed to absorb the atmosphere. He threw up the window to get a little air, but somehow

the projecting masonry of the old walls outside seemed to intercept it. He felt an oppression in his breast, a desire to draw long breaths, to get more air into his lungs. It was the same sensation which he had felt last night, and he did not contemplate with any pleasure the idea of another long evening alone in so strange an atmosphere. However, he must make the best of it. He went to the bookshelf and got down again his *Trois Mousquetaires*. When the candles were lighted, he would write a dutiful long letter to his mother, and tell her all that had been going on about him, especially that barbarous suggestion about the cottagers.

"Fancy me in the character of a rapacious landlord, turning a whole community out of doors!" he said to himself, concocting the imaginary letter, and laughed aloud with a thrill of indignation.

Next moment he started violently, and turned round with a wild rush of blood to his head, and that sort of rallying and huddling together of all the forces of his mind which one feels in a sudden catastrophe. It was, however, no loud alarm that had sounded. It was the clear and distinct vibration of a voice close to him, replying calmly to his thought.

"Is there anything special in you to disqualify you for doing a disagreeable duty?" some one said.

Walter had started back at the first sound, his heart giving a bound in him of surprise—perhaps of terror. He had meant to take that great chair by the fire as soon as he had taken his book from the shelf, so that it

must (he said to himself in instantaneous self-argument) have been vacant then. It was not vacant now. A gentleman sat there, with his face half turned towards the light looking towards the young man; his attitude was perfectly easy, his voice a well-bred and cultivated voice. There seemed neither hurry nor excitement about him. He had not the air of a person newly entered, but rather of one who had been seated there for some time at his leisure, observing what was going on. He lifted his hand with a sort of deprecating yet commanding gesture.

"There is no occasion," he said, in his measured voice, "for alarm. I have no intention of harming you, or any one. Indeed I am not aware that I have any power of harm."

Never in his life before had Walter's soul been swept by such violent sensations. He had an impulse of flight and of deadly overwhelming terror, and then of sickening shame at his own panic. Why should he be afraid? He felt dimly that this moment was the crisis of his life, and that if he fled or retreated he was lost. He stood his ground, grasping the back of a chair to support himself.

"Who are you?" he said.

"That is a searching question," said the stranger, with a smile. "We will come to it by and by. I should like to know in the first place what there is in you which makes it impossible to act with justice in certain circumstances?"

The air of absolute and calm superiority with which he put this question was beyond description.

Walter felt like a criminal at the bar.

"Who are you?" he repeated hoarsely. He stood with a curious sense of being supported only by the grasp which he had taken of the back of the chair, feeling himself a mere bundle of impulses and sensations, hardly able to keep himself from flight, hardly able to keep from falling down at the feet of this intruder, but holding to a sort of self-restraint by his grasp upon the chair. Naturally, however, his nerves steadied as the moments passed. The first extreme shock of surprise wore away. There was nothing to alarm the most timid in the countenance upon which he gazed. It was that of a handsome man who had scarcely turned middle age, with grey but not white hair very thin on the forehead and temples, a high delicate aquiline nose, and colourless complexion. His mouth closed somewhat sternly, but had a faint melting of a smile about it, by movements which were ingratiating and almost sweet. The chief thing remarkable about the stranger, however, besides the extraordinary suddenness of his appearance, was the perfect composure with which he sat, like a man who not only was the most important person wherever he went, but also complete master of the present scene. It was the young man who was the intruder, not he.

"I will tell you presently who I am," he said. "In

the mean time explain to me why you should be horrified at a step which better men than yourself take every day. Sit down." The stranger allowed himself to smile with distinct intention, and then said in a tone of which it is impossible to describe the refined mockery, "You are afraid?"

Walter came to himself with another sensible shock: his pride, his natural spirit, a certain impulse of self-defence which never forsakes a man, came to his aid. He was inclined to say "No," with natural denial of a contemptuous accusation; but rallying more and more every moment, answered with something like defiance, "Yes—or rather I am not afraid. I am startled. I want to know how you come here, and who you are who question me—in my own house."

"You are very sure that it is your own house? You mean to have it restored and made into a piece of sham antiquity—if nothing prevents?"

"What can prevent? if I say it is to be done," cried the young man. His blood seemed to curdle in his veins when he heard the low laugh with which alone the stranger replied. "May I ask you—to withdraw or to tell me who you are?" he said. His voice trembled in spite of himself. The words left his lips quite sturdily, but quivered when they got into the air, or so in the fantastic hurry of his mind he thought.

"If I refuse, what then?" the stranger said.

These two individuals confronted each other, defying

each other, one angry and nervous, the other perfectly calm. In such circumstances only one result is sure: that he who retains his self-possession will have the mastery. Walter felt himself completely baffled. He could not turn out with violence a dignified and serious visitor, who assumed indeed an intolerable superiority, and had come in without asking leave, but yet was evidently a person of importance—if nothing more. He stared at him for a moment, gradually becoming familiarized with the circumstances. "You are master of the situation," he said, with a hard-drawn breath. "I suppose I can do nothing but submit. But if politeness on my part requires this of me, it requires on yours some information. Your name, your object?"

They looked at each other once more for a moment.

"When you put it in that way, I have nothing to say," said the stranger, with great courtesy; "but to acknowledge your right to require—"

At that moment the door opened hurriedly, and Symington came in.

"Your lordship will be wanting something?" he said. "I heard your voice. Was it to light the lights? or would it be for tea, or——"

He gave a sort of scared glance round the room, and clung to the handle of the door, but his eyes did not seem to distinguish the new-comer in the failing twilight.

"I did not call; but you may light the candles,"

Walter said, feeling his own excitement, which had been subsiding, spring up again, in his curiosity to see what Symington's sensations would be.

The old man came in reluctantly. He muttered something uneasily in his throat. "I would have brought a light if I had known. You might have cried down the stairs. It's just out of all order to light the lights this gate," he muttered. But he did not disobey. He went round the room lighting one after another of the twinkling candles in the sconces. Now and then he gave a scared and tremulous look about him; but he took no further notice. The stranger sat quite composedly, looking on with a smile while this process was gone through. Then Symington came up to the table in front of which Walter still stood.

"Take a seat, my lord, take a seat," he said. "It's no canny to see you standing just glowering frae ye, as we say in the country. You look just as if you were seeing something. And take you your French fallow that you were reading last night. It's better when you're by yourself in an auld house like this, that has an ill-name, always to do something to occupy your thoughts."

Walter looked at the stranger, who made a little gesture of intelligence with a nod and smile; and old Symington followed the look, still with that scared expression on his face.

"Your lordship looks for all the world as if you were staring at something in that big chair; you must be

careful to take no fancies in your head," the old servant said. He gave a little nervous laugh, and retreated somewhat quickly towards the door. "And talk no more to yourself; it's an ill habit," he added, with one more troubled glance round him as he closed the door.

CHAPTER XIII.

"AND so you have made acquaintance with the young lord—tell us what kind of person he is, Mrs. Forrester—tell us what you think of him, Oona."

This was the unanimous voice which rose from the party assembled on the second day after Walter's visit in the drawing-room in the Isle.

It was by no means out of the world, though to all appearances so far removed from its commotions. A low cottage-mansion on the crest of a rock, in the middle of Loch Houran, six miles from the railway at the nearest spot on which you could land, and with a mile or so of water, often rough, between you and the post-office, is it possible to imagine a more complete seclusion? and yet it was not a seclusion at all. Oona cared very little for the roughness of the water between the Isle and the post-office, and Hamish nothing at all, and news came as constantly and as regularly to the two ladies on their island as to any newspaper—news from all quarters of the world. The mail days were almost as important to them—in one way far more important than to any merchant in his office. Budgets came and

went every week, and both Oona and her mother would be busy till late at night, the little gleam of their lighted windows shining over the dark loch, that no one might miss his or her weekly letter. These letters went up into the hill countries in India, far away to the borders of Cashmere, round the world to Australia, dropt midway into the coffee groves of Ceylon. When one of the boys was quartered in Canada, to which there is a mail three times a week, *that* looked like next parish, and they thought nothing of it. Neither need it be supposed that this was the only enlivenment of their lives. The loch, though to the tourist it looks silent enough, was in fact fringed by a number of houses in which the liveliest existence was going on. The big new house at the point, which had been built by a wealthy man of Glasgow, with every possible splendour, threw the homelier houses of the native gentry a little into the shade; but nobody bore him any malice, his neighbours being all so well aware that their own "position" was known and unassailable, that his finery and his costliness gave them no pang. They were all a little particular about their "position:" but then nobody on the loch could make any mistake about that, or for a moment imagine that Mr. Williamson from Glasgow could rival the Scotts of Inverhouran, the Campbells of Ellermore, of Glentruan, and half a dozen names beside, or the Forresters of Eaglescairn, or the old Montroses, who, in fact, were a branch of the Macnabs, and held their house on the Isle from that

important but extinct clan. This was so clearly understood that there was not an exception made to the Williamsons, who knew their place, and were very nice, and made a joke of their money, which was their social standing ground. They had called their house, which was as big as a castle, in the most unobstrusive manner, Birkenbraes, thus proving at once that they were new people and Lowlanders: so much better taste, everybody said, than any pretence at Highland importance or name. And this being once acknowledged, the gentry of the loch adopted the Williamsons cordially, and there was not a word to be said. But all the Campbells about, and those excellent Williamsons, and a few families who were not Campbells, yet belonged to Loch Houran, kept a good deal of life "on the loch," which was a phrase that meant in the district generally. And the Isle was not a dull habitation, whatever a stranger might think. There was seldom a day when a boat or two was not to be seen, sometimes for hours together, drawn up upon the rocky beach. And the number of persons entertained by Mrs. Forrester at the early dinner which was politely called luncheon would have appeared quite out of proportion with her means by any one unacquainted with Highland ways. There was trout from the loch, which cost nothing except Hamish's time, a commodity not too valuable, and there was grouse during the season, which cost still less, seeing it came from all the sportsmen about. And the scones, of every variety known in Scotland, which is

a wide word, were home-made. So that hospitality reigned, and yet Mrs. Forrester, who was a skilled housekeeper, and Mysie, to whom the family resources were as her own, and its credit still more precious than her own, managed somehow to make ends meet.

On this particular afternoon the drawing-room with all its slim sofas and old-fashioned curiosities was full of Campbells, for young Colin of Ellermore was at home for his holiday, and it was a matter of course that his sisters and Tom, the youngest, who was at home reading (very little) for his coming examination, should bring him to the Isle. Colin was rather a finer gentleman than flourished by nature upon the loch. He had little company ways which made his people laugh; but when he had been long enough at home to forget these he was very nice they all said. He was in London, and though in trade, in "tea," which is rather aristocratic, he was in society too.

"What kind of person is he, Mrs. Forrester? Tell us what you think of him, Oona," was what this youthful band said.

"Well, my dears," said Mrs. Forrester, "he is just a very nice young man. I don't know how I can describe him better, for young men now-a-days are very like one another. They all wear the same clothes—not but what," she added graciously, "I would know Colin anywhere for a London gentleman with his things all so well made: but Lord Erradeen was just in a kind of tweed suit, and nothing remarkable. And his hands in

his pockets, like all of ye. But he answered very nicely when I spoke to him, and said he was more used to Walter Methven than to any other name, and that to be neighbourlike would just be his pleasure. It is not possible to be more pleasant and well-spoken than the young man was."

"Oh, but I want a little more," cried Marjorie Campbell; "that tells nothing; is he fair, or is he dark? is he tall or is he little—is he—"

"He couldn't be little," cried Janet, indignantly, "or he would not be a hero: and I've made up my mind he's to be a hero. He'll have to do something grand, but I don't know what: and to spoil it all with making him small—"

"Heroes are all short," said Tom, "and all the great generals. You don't want weedy, long-legged fellows like Colin and the rest of them. But you know they all run to legs in our family, all but me."

"All this is irrelevant," said Colin with a smile which was somewhat superior, "and you prevent Mrs. Forrester from giving us the masterly characterisation which I know is on her lips."

"You are just a flatterer," said that simple lady, shaking her finger at him; "there was no character coming from my lips. He is just a fine simple-hearted young man. It appears he never knew what he was heir to, and has no understanding even now, so far as I could learn, about the Erradeens. He told me he had been a thoughtless lad, and, as well as I could

judge just a handful to his poor mother; but that all that was over and gone."

"You are going too far, mamma," said Oona. "He said he had 'loafed.' Loafing means no harm, does it, Colin? It means mere idleness, and no more."

"Why should you think I am an authority on the subject?" said Colin. "I never loaf: I go to the City every day. When I come back I have to keep up society, so far as I can, and hunt about for invitations, otherwise I should never be asked out. That is not loafing, it is hard work."

"Ask me, Oona," said young Tom; "I can tell you. It is the nicest thing in the world. It means just doing nothing you are wanted to do, taking your own way, watching nature, don't you know, and studying men, and that sort of thing, which all the literary people say is better than cramming. But only it does not pay in an exam."

"Oh, hold your tongue, Tommy," cried his sister. "You will fail again, you know you will, and papa will be in despair. For you are not like Colin, who is clever; you are good for nothing but soldiering, and next year you will be too old."

"It's a shame," cried Tom hotly, "to make a fellow's commission depend upon his spelling. What has spelling to do with it? But I'm going into the militia, and then I shall be all right."

"And did Erradeen," said Colin to Mrs. Forrester, "let out any of the secrets of his prison-house?"

"Bless me, he looked just as cheerful as yourself or even as Tom. There was nothing miserable about him," Mrs. Forrester replied. "He had been all the morning enjoying himself on the loch, and he came up and ate his lunch just very hearty, and as happy as possible, with Oona and me. He was just very like my own Ronald or Rob: indeed I think there's something in his complexion and his way of holding himself that is very like Rob; and took my opinion about the old castle, and what was the meaning of the light on the tower. Indeed," added Mrs. Forrester with a laugh, "I don't know if it is anything in me that draws people to tell me their stories, but it is a very general thing, especially for young persons, to ask for my advice."

"Because you're so kind," said Janet Campbell, who was romantic and admired the old beauty.

"Because you're so clever," said Marjorie, who had a turn for satire.

Oona, whose ear was very quick for any supposed or possible ridicule, such as her mother's little foibles occasionally laid her open to, turned quickly round from Tom, leaving him speaking, and with a little heightened colour interposed.

"We are opposite to the castle night and day," she said. "We cannot go out to the door or gather a flower without seeing it; and at night there it is in the moonlight. So naturally we are better acquainted with what happens than anybody else can be."

"And do you really, really believe in the light?" said Marjorie.

Ellermore lay quite at the other end of the great loch, among another range of hills, and was shut out from personal acquaintance with the phenomena of Kinloch Houran. Colin gave a slight laugh, the faintest possible indication of incredulity, to repeat with an increase of force the doubt in his sister's tone. Oona was not without a healthful little temper, which showed in the flash of her eye and the reddening of her cheek. But she answered very steadily, with much suppressed feeling in her tone—

"What do you call believing?" she said. "You believe in things you cannot see? then I don't believe in the Kinloch Houran light. Because I see it, and have seen it a hundred times as clear as day."

At this there was a little pause among the party of visitors, that pause of half-amused superiority and scepticism, with which all believers in the mysterious are acquainted. And then Marjorie, who was the boldest, replied—

"Papa says it is a sort of phosphorescence, which is quite explainable: and that where there is so much decaying matter, and so much damp, and so much——"

"Faith, perhaps," said Colin, with that slight laugh; "but we are outsiders, and we have no right to interfere with the doctrines of the loch. Oona, give us that credit that we are outside the circle, and you must not send us to the stake."

"Oh, my dears," said Mrs. Forrester, "and that is quite true. I have heard very clever men say that there was nothing made so much difference in what you believed as just the place you were born in, and that people would go the stake, as you say, on one side of the border for a thing they just laughed at on the other."

This, which was a very profound deliverance for Mrs. Forrester, she carried off at the end with a pretty profession of her own disabilities.

"I never trust to my own judgment," she said. "But Oona is just very decided on the subject, and so are all our people on the isle, and I never put myself forward one way or another. Are you sure you will not take a cup of tea before you go? a cup of tea is never out of place. It is true that the day is very short, and Colin, after his town life, will be out of the way of rowing. You are just going across by the ferry, and then driving? Well, that is perhaps the best way. And in that case there is plenty of time for a cup of tea. Just ring the bell, or perhaps it will be safer, Oona, if you will cry upon Mysie and tell her to lose no time. Just the tea, and a few of the cream scones, and a little cake. She need not spread the table as there is so little time."

The interlude of the tea and the cream scones made it late before the visitors got away. Their waggonette was visible waiting for them on the road below Auchnasheen, and five minutes were enough to get them

across, so that they dallied over this refreshment with little thought of the waning afternoon. Then there was a little bustle to escort them down to the beach, to see them carefully wrapped up, to persuade Marjorie that another "hap" would be desirable, and Janet that her "cloud" should be twisted once more about her throat. The sunset was waning when at last they were fairly off, and the loch lay in a still, yellow radiance, against which every tree and twig, every rock and stone, stood out dark in full significance of outline. It was cold, and Mrs. Forrester shivered in her furred cloak.

"The shore looks so near that you could touch it," she said; "there will be rain to-morrow, Oona."

"What does it matter about to-morrow?" cried the girl; "it's beautiful to-night. Go in, mamma, to the fireside; but I will stay here and see them drive away."

The mother consented to this arrangement, which was so natural; but a moment afterwards came back and called from the porch, where she stood sheltered from the keen and eager air,

"Oona! Come in, my dear. That Colin one, with his London ways, will think you are watching him."

There was something sublime in the fling of Oona's head, and the erection of her slim figure, as she rejected the possibility.

"Watching *him!*" She was too proud even to permit herself to resent it.

"Ah! but you never can tell what a silly lad may

take into his head," said Mrs. Forrester; and, having thus cleared her conscience, she went in and took off her cloak, and shut the drawing-room door, and made herself very comfortable in her own cosy chair in the ruddy firelight. She laid her head back upon the soft cushions and looked round her with a quiet sense of content. Everything was so comfortable, so pretty and homelike; and by-and-by she permitted herself, for ten minutes or so, to fall into a soft oblivion. "I just closed my eyes," was Mrs. Forrester's little euphuism to herself.

Meanwhile Oona stood and looked at sky and sea and shore. The soft plash of the oars came through the great stillness, and, by-and-by, there was the sound of the boat run up upon the shingle, and the noise of the disembarkation, the voices swelling out in louder tones and laughter. As they waved their hands in a final good-night to the watcher on the isle before they drove away, the young people, as Mrs. Forrester had said, laughed and assured Colin that it was not for them Oona stood out in the evening chill. But, as a matter of fact, there was nothing so little in Oona's mind. She was looking round her with that sort of exaltation which great loneliness and stillness and natural beauty so naturally give: the water gleaming all round, the sky losing its orange glow and melting into soft primrose tints the colour of the daffodil.

"The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration."

All the sensations that belong to such a moment are exquisite; a visionary elevation above the earth and all things earthly, a soft pensiveness, an elation, yet wistful longing of the soul. Before her the old castle of Kinloch Houran lay gloomy and dark on the edge of the water. If she thought of anything it was of the young neighbour, to whom she felt so strangely near in wonder and sympathy. Who might be with him at that moment in the ghostly quiet? What thoughts, what suggestions, were being placed before him? Oona put her hands together, and breathed into the still air a wish of wondering and wistful pity which was almost a prayer. And then, rousing herself with a slight shiver and shake, she turned and went in, shutting out behind her the lingering glory of the water and sky.

Mysie was lighting the candles when she went in, and Mrs. Forrester had opened her eyes. Two candles on the mantelpiece and two on the table were all the ladies allowed themselves, except on great occasions, when the argand lamp, which was the pride of the household, was lighted in honour of a visitor. The warmth of this genial interior was very welcome after the cold of the twilight, and Oona brought her work to the table, and the book from which her mother was in the habit of reading aloud. Mrs. Forrester thought she improved her daughter's mind by these readings; but, to tell the truth, Oona's young soul, with all the world and life yet before it, often fled far enough away while her mother's soft voice, with the pretty tricks of elocu-

tion, which were part of her old-fashioned training, went on. Never was there a prettier indoor scene. In the midst of that great solitude of woods and water, the genial comfort of this feminine room, so warm, so softly lighted, so peaceful and serene, struck the imagination like a miracle. Such a tranquil retirement would have been natural enough safely planted amid the safeguards and peaceful surroundings of a village: but in being here there was a touching incongruity. The little play of the mother's voice as she read with innocent artifice and the simple vanity which belonged to her, the pretty work, of no great use, with which the girl was busy, both heightened the sense of absolute trust with which they lived in the bosom of nature. A sudden storm, one could not but think, might have swept them away into the dark gleaming water that hemmed them round. They were not afraid: they were as safe as in a citadel. They were like the birds in their nests; warm and soft, though in the heart of Loch Houran. Mrs. Forrester was reading a historical novel, one of the kind which she thought so good for improving Oona's mind; amusing, yet instructing her. But Oona's mind, refusing to be improved, was giving only a mechanical attention. It was away making a little pilgrimage of wonder about the mystic house which was so near them, longing to know, and trying to divine, what was going on there.

But when the afternoon closes in at four o'clock, and the candles are lighted shortly after, the night is long.

It seemed endless on this occasion, because of the too early tea, which Mrs. Forrester had thought it would be "just a farce" to produce again at six o'clock, their usual hour; and from half-past four till nine, when the small and light repast known in the house under the pleasantly indefinite name of "the tray" made its appearance, is a long time. There had been two or three interruptions of a little talk, and the book had been laid down and resumed again, and Oona's work had dropped two or three times upon her knee, when Mysie, coming in, announced that it was just an uncommon fine night, though all the signs (including the glass, which, however, does not always count in the west of Scotland) pointed to rain, and that Hamish was going to take advantage of the moonlight to do an errand at the village above Auchnasheen. Would Miss Oona like to go? It was just awfu' bonny, and with plenty of haps she could take no harm, Mysie said. To see how the girl sprang from her seat was a proof of the gentle tedium that had stolen upon her soul.

"But, my dear, it will be cold, cold. I am afraid of you catching cold, Oona," Mrs. Forrester cried.

"Oh, mother, no. I never catch cold; and besides, if I did, what would it matter? Tell him I'm coming, Mysie; tell him to wait for me. I'll put on my thick ulster, or the fur cloak, if you like."

"Certainly, the fur cloak, Oona. I will not hear of it without that. But, my dear, just think, Hamish will have to leave you in the boat while he goes to the

village; and what would you do, Oona, if there is any one on the road?"

"Do, mamma? Look at them, to see if I knew them. And, if it was a stranger, just sit still and say nothing."

"But, my dear! It might be somebody that would speak to you, and—annoy you, Oona."

"There is no person up the loch or down the loch that would dare to do that, mem," said Mysie, composedly.

"How can we tell? It might be some tourist or gangrel body."

"Annoy *me!*" said Oona, as if indeed this suggestion was too far-fetched for possibility. "If anything so ridiculous happened I would just push out into the loch. Don't you trouble, mother, about me."

Mrs. Forrester got up to envelop her child's throat in fold after fold of the fleecy white "cloud." She shook her head a little, but she was resigned, for such little controversies occurred almost daily. The evening had changed when Oona ran lightly down the bank to the boat in which Hamish was waiting. Everything about was flooded with the keen, clear white moonlight, which in its penetrating chilly fashion was almost more light than day. The loch was shining like silver, but with a blackness behind the shining, and all the shadows were like midnight profound in inky gloom. The boat seemed to hang suspended in the keen atmosphere rather than to float, and the silence was shrill, and

seemed to cut into the soul. It was but a few minutes across the cold white glittering strait that lay between the isle and the mainland. Hamish jumped out with an exaggerated noise upon the slippery shingle, and fastened the boat with a rattle of the ring to which it was attached, which woke echoes all around both from land and water, everything under the mingled influence of winter and night being so still. A chance spectator would have thought that the mother had very good cause for her alarm, and that to sit there in the rough boat absolutely alone, like the one living atom in a world all voiceless and asleep, was not a cheerful amusement for a girl. But Oona had neither fear nor sense of strangeness in an experience which she had gone through so often. She called out lightly to Hamish to make haste, and looked after him as he set out on the white road, the peculiarities of his thick-set figure coming out drolly in the curious dab of foreshortened shadow flung upon the road by his side. She laughed at this to herself, and the laugh ran all about with a wonderful cheerful thrill of the silence. How still it was! When her laugh ceased, there was nothing but the steps of Hamish in all the world—and by and by even the steps ceased, and that stillness which could be felt settled down. There was not a breath astir, not enough to cause the faintest ripple on the beach. Now and then a pebble which had been pushed out of its place by the man's foot toppled over, and made a sound as if something great had fallen. Otherwise not a breath

was stirring; the shadows of the fir-trees looked as if they were gummed upon the road. And Oona held her breath; it seemed almost profane to disturb the intense and perfect quiet. She knew every hue of every rock, and the profile of every tree. And presently, which no doubt was partly because of this perfect acquaintance, and partly because of some mesmeric consciousness in the air, such as almost invariably betrays the presence of a human being, her eyes fixed upon one spot where the rock seemed higher than she had been used to. Was it possible that somebody was there? She changed her place to look more closely; and so fearless was the girl that she had nearly jumped out of the boat to satisfy herself whether it was a man or a rock. But just when she was about making up her mind to do so, the figure moved, and came down towards the beach. Oona's heart gave a jump; several well-authenticated stories which she had heard from her childhood came into her mind with a rush. She took the end of the rope softly in her hand so as to be able to detach it in a moment. To row back to the isle was easy enough.

"Is it you, Miss Forrester?" a voice said.

Oona let go the rope, and her heart beat more calmly. "I might with more reason cry out, Is it you, Lord Erradeen? for if you are at the old castle you are a long way from home, and I am quite near."

"I am at Auchnasheen," he said. A great change had come over his tone; it was very grave; no longer the airy voice of youth which had jested and laughed

on the Isle. He came down and stood with his hand on the bow of the boat. He looked very pale, very serious, but that might be only the blackness of the shadows and the whiteness of the light.

"Did you ever see so spiritual a night?" said Oona. "There might be anything abroad; not fairies, who belong to summer, but serious things."

"Do you believe then in—ghosts?" he said.

"Ghosts is an injurious phrase. Why should we call the poor people so who are only—dead?" said Oona. "But that is a false way of speaking too, isn't it? for it is not because they are dead, but living, that they come back."

"I am no judge," he said, with a little shiver. "I never have thought on the subject. I suppose superstition lingers longer up among the mountains."

"Superstition!" said Oona, with a laugh. "What ugly words you use!"

Once more the laugh seemed to ripple about, and break the solemnity of the night. But young Lord Erradeen was as solemn as the night, and his countenance was not touched even by a responsive smile. His gravity produced upon the girl's mind that feeling of visionary panic and distrust which had not been roused by the external circumstances. She felt herself grow solemn too, but struggled against it.

"Hamish has gone up with some mysterious communication to the game-keeper," she said; "and in these long nights one is glad of a little change. I

came out with him to keep myself from going to sleep."

Which was not perhaps exactly true: but there had arisen a little embarrassment in her mind, and she wanted something to say.

"And I came out—" he said; then paused. "The night is not so ghostly as the day," he added, hurriedly; "nor dead people so alarming as the living."

"You mean that you disapprove of our superstitions, as you call them," said Oona. "Most people laugh and believe a little; but I know some are angry and think it wrong."

"I——angry! That was not what I meant. I meant—— It is a strange question which is living and which is—— To be sure, you are right, Miss Forrester. What is dead cannot come in contact with us, only what is living. It is a mystery altogether."

"You are not a sceptic then?" said Oona. "I am glad of that."

"I am not——anything. I don't know how to form an opinion. How lovely it is, to be sure," he burst out all at once; "especially to have some one to talk to. That is the great charm."

"If that is all," said Oona, trying to speak cheerfully, "you will soon have dozens of people to talk to, for everybody in the county—and that is a wide word—is coming to call. They will arrive in shoals as soon as they know."

"I think I shall go—in a day or two," he said.

At this moment the step of Hamish, heard far off through the great stillness, interrupted the conversation. It had been as if they two were alone in this silent world; and the far-off step brought in a third and disturbed them. They were silent, listening as it came nearer and nearer, the sound growing with every repetition. When Hamish appeared in the broad white band of road coming from between the shadows of the trees the young man dropped his hand from the bow of the boat. He had not spoken again, nor did Oona feel herself disposed to speak. Hamish quickened his pace when he saw another figure on the beach.

"Ye'll no' have been crying upon me, Miss Oona," he said, with a suspicious look at the stranger.

"Oh no, Hamish!" cried Oona, cheerfully. "I have not been wearying at all, for this is Lord Erradeen that has been so kind as to come and keep me company."

"Oh, it 'll be my Lord Erradeen?" said Hamish, with a curious look into Walter's face.

Then there was a repetition of the noises with which the still loch rang, the rattle of the iron ring, the grating of the bow on the shingle as she was pushed off. Hamish left no time for leave-taking. There were a few yards of clear water between the boat and the beach when Oona waved her hand to the still figure left behind. "My mother will like to see you to-morrow," she cried, with an impulse of sympathy. "Good night."

He took his hat off, and waved his hand in reply, but said nothing, and stood motionless till they lost sight of

him round the corner of the isle. Then Hamish, who had been exerting himself more than usual, paused a little.

"Miss Oona," he said, "yon will maybe be the young lord, but maybe no. I would not be speaking to the first that comes upon the loch side——"

"Oh, if you are beginning to preach propriety——" the girl cried.

"It'll not be propriety, it will just be that they're a family that is not canny. Who will tell you if it's one or if it's the other? Did ye never hear the tale of the leddy that fell off the castle wall?"

"But this is not the castle," cried Oona, "and I know him very well—and I'm sorry for him, Hamish. He looks so changed."

"Oh, what would you do being sorry for him? He has nothing ado with us—nothing ado with us," Hamish said.

And how strange it was to come in again from that brilliant whiteness and silence—the ghostly loch, the visionary night—into the ruddy room full of firelight and warmth, all shut in, sheltered, full of companionship.

"Come away, come away to the fire; you must be nearly frozen, Oona, and I fear ye have caught your death of cold," her mother said.

Oona remembered with a pang the solitary figure on the water's edge, and wondered if he were still standing there forlorn. A whole chapter of life seemed to have interposed between her going and coming, though she had been but half an hour away.

CHAPTER XIV.

Two days after this night scene there was a gathering such as was of weekly occurrence in the Manse of Loch Houran parish. The houses were far apart, and those of the gentry who were old-fashioned enough to remain for the second service, were in the habit of spending the short interval between in the minister's house, where an abundant meal, called by his housekeeper a cold collation, was spread in the dining-room for whosoever chose to partake. As it was the fashion in the country to dine early on Sunday, this repast was but sparingly partaken of, and most of the company, after the glass of wine or milk, the sandwich or biscuit, which was all they cared to take, would sit round the fire in the minister's library, or examine his books, or, what was still more prized, talk to him of their own or their neighbours' affairs. The minister of Loch Houran was one of those celibates who are always powerful ecclesiastically, though the modern mind is so strongly opposed to any artificial manufacture of them such as that which the Church of Rome in her wisdom has thought expedient. We all know the arguments in

favour of a married clergy, but those on the other side of the question it is the fashion to ignore. He who has kept this natural distinction by fair means, and without compulsion, has however an unforced advantage of his own which the most Protestant and the most matrimonial of polemics will scarcely deny. He is more safe to confide in, being one, not two. He is more detached and individual; it is more natural that all the world about him should have a closer claim upon the man who has no nearer claims to rival those of his spiritual children. Mr. Cameron was one of this natural priesthood. If he had come to his present calm by reason of passion and disappointment in his past, such as we obstinately and romantically hope to have founded the tranquillity of subdued, sunny, and sober age, nobody could tell. An old minister may perhaps be let off more easily in this respect than an old monk; but he was the friend and consoler of everybody; the depositary of all the secrets of the parish; the one adviser of whose disinterestedness and secrecy every perplexed individual was sure. He did all that man could do to be absolutely impartial and divide himself, as he divided his provisions, among his guests as their needs required. But flesh is weak, and Mr. Cameron could not disown one soft place in his heart for Oona Forrester, of which that young person was quite aware. Oona was his pupil and his favourite, and he was, if not her spiritual director, which is a position officially unknown to his Church, at least her confidant in all her little difficulties,

which comes to much the same thing: and this notwithstanding the fact that Mrs. Forrester attended the parish church under protest, and prided herself on belonging to the Scottish Episcopal community, the Church of the gentry, though debarred by providence from her privileges. Mrs. Forrester at this moment, with her feet on the fender, was employed in bewailing this sad circumstance with another landed lady in the same position; but Oona was standing by the old ministers side, with her hand laid lightly within his arm, which was a pretty way she had when she was with her oldest friend. It did not interfere with this attitude, that he was exchanging various remarks with other people, and scarcely talking to Oona at all. He looked down upon her from time to time with a sort of proud tenderness, as her grandfather might have done. It pleased the old man to feel the girl's slim small fingers upon his arm. And as there were no secrets discussed in this weekly assembly her presence interrupted nothing. She added her word from time to time, or the still readier comment of smiles and varying looks that changed like the Highland sky outside, and were never for two minutes the same. It was not, however, till Mr. Shaw, the factor, came in, that the easy superficial interest of all the parish talk quickened into something more eager and warm in her sympathetic countenance. Shaw's ruddy face was full of care; this was indeed its usual expression, an expression all the more marked from the blunt and open sim-

plicity of its natural mood to which care seemed alien. The puckers about his hazel grey eyes, the lines on his forehead which exposure to the air had reddened rather than browned, were more than usually evident. Those honest eyes seemed to be remonstrating with the world and fate. They had an appearance half-comic to the spectator, but by no means comic to their own consciousness of grieved interrogation as if asking every one on whom they turned, "Why did you do it?" "Why did you let it be done?" It was this look which he fixed upon the minister, who indeed was most innocent of all share in the cause of his trouble.

"I told you," he said, "the other day, about the good intentions of our young lord. I left various things with him to be settled that would bide no delay—things that had been waiting for the late Lord Erradeen from day to day. And all this putting off has been bad, bad. There's those poor crofters that will have to be put out of their bits of places to-morrow. I can hold off no longer without his lordship's warrant. And not a word from him—not a word!" cried the good man, with that appealing look, to which the natural reply was, It is not my fault. But the minister knew better, and returned a look of sympathy, shaking his white head.

"What has become of the young man? they tell me he has left the castle."

"He is not far off—he is at Auchnasheen; but he is just like all the rest, full of goodwill one day, and just inaccessible the next—just inaccessible!" repeated the

factor. And what am I to do? I am just wild to have advice from somebody. What am I to do?"

"Can you not get at him to speak to him?" the minister asked.

"I have written to know if he will see me. I have said I was waiting an answer, but there's no answer comes. They say he's on the hill all day, though the keepers know nothing about his movements, and he does not even carry a gun. What am I to do? He sees nobody; two or three have called, but cannot get at him. He's always out—he's never there. That old Symington goes about wringing his hands. What says he? he says, 'This is the worst of a'; this is the worst of a'. He's just got it on him——'"

"What does that mean?"

"Can I tell what that means? According to the old wives it is the weird of the Methvens; but you don't believe such rubbish, nor do I. It has, maybe, something to do with the drainage, or the water, or the sanitary arrangements, one way or the other!" cried the factor with a harsh and angry laugh.

Then there was a momentary pause, and the hum of the other people's talk came in, filling up with easier tones of conversation the somewhat strained feeling of this: "He's a good shot and a fine oar, and just a deevil for spunk and courage: and yet because he's a little vague in his speaking!" "But, I say, we must put up with what we can get, and though it's a trial the surplice is not just salvation." "And it turned out

to be measles, and not fever at all, and nothing to speak of; so we just cheated the doctors." These were the broken scraps that came in to fill up the pause.

"I saw Lord Erradeen the other night," said Oona, whose light grasp on the old minister's arm had been tightening and slackening all through this dialogue, in the interest she felt. Both of the gentlemen turned to look at her inquiringly, and the girl blushed—not for any reason, as she explained to herself indignantly afterwards, but because it was a foolish way she had; but somehow the idea suggested to all their minds was not without an effect upon the events of her after-life.

"And what did he say to you? and what is he intending? and why does he shut himself up and let all the business hang suspended like yon fellow Machomet's coffin?" cried the factor, with a guttural in the prophet's name which was due to the energy of his feelings. He turned upon Oona those remonstrating eyes of his, as if he had at last come to the final cause of all the confusion, and meant to demand of her, without any quibbling, an answer to the question, Why did you do it? on the spot.

"Indeed, he said very little to me, Mr. Shaw. He looked like a ghost, and he said—he was going away in a day or two."

Sudden reflection in the midst of what she was saying made it apparent to Oona that it was unnecessary to give all the details of the interview. Mr. Cameron, for his part, laid his large, soft old hand

tenderly upon hers which was on his arm, and said, in the voice which always softened when he addressed her—

"And where would that be, my bonnie Oona, that you met with Lord Erradeen?"

"It was on the beach below Auchnasheen," said Oona, with an almost indignant frankness, holding her head high, but feeling, to her anger and distress, the blush burn upon her cheek. "Hamish had some errand on shore, and I went with him in the boat. I was waiting for him, when some one came down from the road and spoke to me. I was half-frightened, for I did not know any one was there. It was Lord Erradeen."

"And what?—and why?—and—"

The factor was too much disturbed to form his questions reasonably, even putting aside the evident fact that Oona had no answer to give him. But at this moment the little cracked bell began to sound, which was the warning that the hour of afternoon service approached. The ladies rose from their seats round the fire, the little knots of men broke up. "Oona, my dear, will ye come and tie my bonnet? I never was clever at making a bow," said Mrs. Forrester; and the minister left his guests to make his preparations for church. Mr. Shaw felt himself left in the lurch. He kept hovering about Oona with a quick decision in his own mind, which was totally unjustified by any foundation; he went summarily through a whole romance,

and came to its conclusion in the most matter-of-fact and expeditious way. "If that comes to pass now!" he said to himself. "*She's* no Me'ven; there's no weird on her; he can give her the management of the estates, and all will go well. She has a head upon her shoulders, though she is nothing but a bit girlie—and there will be me to make everything plain!" Such was the brief epitome of the situation that passed in the factor's mind. He was very anxious to get speech of Oona on the way to church, and it is to be feared that Mr. Cameron's excellent afternoon discourse (which many people said was always his best, though as it was listened to but drowsily the fact may be doubted) made little impression upon Shaw, though he was a serious man, who could say his say upon religious subjects, and was an elder, and had sat in the Assembly in his day. He had his opportunity when the service was over, when the boats were being pushed off from the beach, and the carriages got under way, for those who had far to go. Mrs. Forrester had a great many last words to say before she put on her furred mantle and her white cloud, and took her place in the boat; and Mysie, who stood ready with the mantle to place it on her mistress's shoulders, had also her own little talks to carry on at that genial moment when all the parish—or all the loch, if you like the expression better—stood about exchanging friendly greetings and news from outlying places. While all the world was thus engaged, Oona fell at last into the hands of the factor, and became his prey.

"Miss Oona," he said, "if ye will accord me a moment, I would like well, well, to know what's your opinion about Lord Erradeen."

"But I have no opinion!" cried Oona, who had been prepared for the attack. She could not keep herself from blushing (so ridiculous! but I will do it, she said to herself, as if that "I" was an independent person over whom she had no control), but otherwise she was on her guard. "How could I have any opinion when I have only seen Lord Erradeen twice — thrice?" she added, with a heightening of the blush, as she remembered the adventure of the coach.

"Twice—thrice; but that gives you facilities—and ladies are so quick-witted. I've seen him but once," said the factor. "I was much taken with him, that is the truth, and was so rash as to think our troubles were over; but here has everything fallen to confusion in the old way. Miss Oona, do you use your influence if you should see his lordship again."

"But, Mr. Shaw, there is no likelihood that I shall see him again—and I have no influence."

"Oh no, you'll not tell me that," said the factor, shaking his head, with a troubled smile. "Them that are like you, young and bonnie, have always influence, if they like to use it. And as for seeing him again, he will never leave the place, Miss Oona, without going at least to bid you good-bye."

"Lord Erradeen may come to take leave of my mother," said Oona, with dignity. "It is possible,

though he did not say so; but even if he does, what can I do? I know nothing about his affairs, and I have no right to say anything to him—no right, more than any one else who has met him three times."

"Which is just no person—except yourself, so far as I can learn," the factor said.

"After all, when you come to think of it, it is only once I have seen him," said Oona, "for the night on the loch was by chance, and the day on the coach I did not know him; so that after all I have only, so to speak, seen him once, and how could I venture to speak to him about business? Oh no, that is out of the question. Yes, mamma, I am quite ready. Mr. Shaw wishes, if Lord Erradeen comes to bid us good-bye that we should tell him——"

"Yes?" said Mrs. Forrester, briskly, coming forward, while Mysie arranged around her her heavy cloak. "I am sure I shall be very glad to give Lord Erradeen any message. He is a very nice young man, so far as I can judge; people think him very like my Ronald, Mr. Shaw. Perhaps it has not struck you? for likenesses are just one of the things that no two people see. But we are very good friends, him and me: he is just a nice simple gentlemanly young man—oh, very gentlemanly. He would never go away without saying good-bye. And I am sure I shall be delighted to give him any message. That will do, Mysie, that will do; do not suffocate me with that cloak. Dear me, you have

scarcely left me a corner to breathe out of. But, Mr. Shaw, certainly—any message——"

"I am much obliged to you; but I will no doubt see Lord Erradeen myself, and I'll not trouble a lady about business," said the factor. He cast a look at Oona, in which with more reason than usual his eyes said, How could you do it? And the girl was a little compunctious. She laughed, but she felt guilty, as she took her mother's arm to lead her to the boat. Mrs. Forrester had still a dozen things to say, and waved her hands to the departing groups on every side, while Shaw, half-angry, stood grimly watching the embarkation.

"There are the Kilhouran Campbells driving away, and I have not had a word with them: and there is old Jess, who always expects to be taken notice of: and the Ellermore folk, that I had no time to ask about Tom's examination: and Mr. Cameron himself, that I never got a chance of telling how well I liked the sermon. Dear me, Oona, you are always in such a hurry! And take care now, take care; one would think you took me for your own age. But I am not wanting to be hoisted up either, as if I were too old to know how to step into a boat. Good-bye, Mr. Shaw, good-bye," Mrs. Forroster added cheerfully, waving her hand as she got herself safely established in the bow, and Hamish, not half so picturesque as usual in his Sunday clothes, pushed off the boat. "Good-bye, and I'll not forget your message." She even kissed her

hand, if not to him, to the parish in general, in the friendliness of her heart.

Mr. Shaw had very nearly shaken his clenched fist in reply. Old fool he called her in his heart, and even launched an expletive (silently) at Oona, "the heartless monkey," who had betrayed him to her mother. He went back to the manse with Mr. Cameron, when all the little talks and consultations were over and everybody gone, and once more poured out the story of his perplexities.

"If I do not hear from him, I'll have to proceed to extremities to-morrow, and it is like to break my heart," he said. "For the poor folk have got into their heads that I will stand their friend whatever happens, and they are just keeping their minds easy."

"But, man, they should pay their rents," said Mr. Cameron, who, when all was said that could be said in his favour, was not a Loch Houran man.

"Rents! where would you have them get the siller? Their bit harvest has failed, and the cows are dry for want of fodder. If they have a penny laid by they must take it to live upon. They have enough ado to live, without thinking of rents."

"But in that case, Shaw," said the minister, gravely —"you must not blame me for saying so, it's what all the wise men say — would they not do better to emigrate, and make a new start in a new country, where there's plenty of room?"

"Oh, I know that argument very well," said Shaw,

with a snort of indignation. "I have it all at my fingers' ends. I've preached it many a day. But what does it mean, when all's done? It means just sheep or it means deer, and a pickle roofless houses standing here and there, and not a soul in the glen. There was a time even when I had just an enthusiasm for it—and I've sent away as many as most. But after all, they're harmless, God-fearing folk; the land is the better of them, and none the worse. There's John Paterson has had great losses with his sheep, and there's yon English loon that had the shooting, and shot every feather on the place; both the one and the other will be far more out of his lordship's pocket than my poor bit crofters. I laid all that before him; and he showed a manful spirit, that I will always say. No, minister, it was not to argue the case from its foundations that I came to you. I know very well what the economists say. I think they're not more than half right, though they're so cocksure. But if you'll tell me what I should do——"

This, however, was what Mr. Cameron was not capable of. He said, after an interval, "I will go to-morrow and try if I can see him, if you think it would not be ill taken."

"To-morrow is the last day," said the factor gloomily: and after a little while he followed the example of all the others, and sent for his dog-cart and drove himself away. But a more anxious man did not traverse any road in Great Britain on that wintry afternoon: and

bitter thoughts were in his heart of the capricious family, whose interests were in his hands, and to whom he was almost too faithful a servant. "Oh, the weird of the Me'vens!" said Mr. Shaw to himself, "if they were not so taken up with themselves and took more thought for other folk we would hear little of any weirds. I have no time for weirds. I have just my work to do and I do it. The Lord preserve us from idleness, and luxury, and occupation with ourselves!" Here the good man in his righteous wrath and trouble and disappointment was unjust, as many a good man has been before.

When Hamish had pushed off from the beach, and the little party were afloat, Oona repented her of that movement of mingled offence and *espièglerie* which had made her transfer the factor's appeal from herself to her mother: and it was only then that Mrs. Forrester recollected how imperfect the communication was. "Bless me," Mrs. Forrester said, "I forgot to ask after all what it was he wanted me to say. That was a daft like thing, to charge me with a message and never to tell me what it was. And how can I tell my Lord Erradeen! I suppose you could not put back, Hamish, to inquire?—but there's nobody left yonder at the landing that I can see, so it would be little use. How could you let me do such a silly thing, Oona, my dear?"

"Most likely, mamma, we shall not see Lord Erradeen and so no harm will be done."

"Not see Lord Erradeen! Do ye think then, Oona, that he has no manners, or that he's ignorant how to behave? I wonder what has made ye take an ill-will at such a nice young man. There was nothing in him to justify it, that I could see. And to think I should have a message for him and not know what it is! How am I to give him the message when it was never given to me? I just never heard of such a dilemma. Something perhaps of importance, and me charged to give it, and not to know what it was!"

"Maybe, mem," said Mysie from the other end of the boat, with that serene certainty that her mistress's affairs were her own, which distinguishes an old Scotch family retainer, "maybe Miss Oona will ken."

"Oh, yes, I suppose I know," said Oona, reluctantly. "It is something about the cotters at the Truach-Glas, who will be turned out to-morrow unless Lord Erradeen interferes; but why should we be charged with that? We are very unlikely to see Lord Erradeen, and to-morrow is the day."

This piece of information caused a great excitement in the little party. The cotters to be turned out!

"But no, no, that was just to frighten you. He will never do it," said Mrs. Forrester, putting on a smile to reassure herself after a great flutter and outcry. "No, no; it must just have been to give us all a fright. John Shaw is a very decent man. I knew his father perfectly well, who was the minister at Rannoch, and a very good preacher. No, no, Oona, my dear—he

could never do it; and yon fine lad that is so like my Ronald (though you will not see it) would never do it. You need not look so pale. It is just his way of joking with you. Many a man thinks it pleasant to tell a story like that to a lady just to hear what she says."

"Eh, but it's ill joking with poor folks' lives," cried Mysie, craning over Hamish's shoulder to hear every word.

"It's none joking," said Hamish, gruffly, between the sweep of his oars.

"It's none joking, say ye? Na, it's grim earnest, or I'm sair mistaken," said the woman. "Eh, Miss Oona, but I would gang round the loch on my bare feet, Sabbath though it be, rather than no give a message like yon."

"How can we do it?" cried Oona; "how are we to see Lord Erradeen? I am sure he will not come to call; and even if he did come to-morrow in the afternoon it would be too late."

"My dear," said Mrs. Forrester, "we will keep a look out in the morning. Hamish will just be fishing at the point, and hail him as soon as he sees him. For it was in the morning he came before."

"Oh, mem!" cried Mysie, "but would you wait for that? It's ill to lippen to a young man's fancy. He might be late of getting up (they're mostly lazy in the morning), or he might be writing his letters, or he might be seeing to his guns, or there's just a hundred

things he might be doing. What would ye say if, may-be, Miss Oona was to write one of her bonnie little notties on that awfu' bonnie paper, with her name upon't, and tell him ye wanted to see him at ten o'clock or eleven o'clock, or whatever time you please?"

"Or we might go over to-night in the boat," said Hamish, laconically.

Mrs. Forrester was used to take much counsel. She turned from one to the other with uncertain looks. "But, Oona," she said, "you are saying nothing! and you are generally the foremost. If it is not just nonsense and a joke of John Shaw's——"

"I think," said Oona, "that Mr. Shaw will surely find some other way; but it was no joke, mother. Who would joke on such a subject? He said if Lord Erradeen called we were to use our influence."

"That would I," said Mrs. Forrester, use my influence. I would just tell him, You must not do it. Bless me, a young man new in the country to take a step like that and put every person against him! No, no, it is not possible: but a lady," she added, bridling a little with her smile of innocent vanity, "a lady may say anything—she may say things that another person cannot. I would just tell him, You must not do it! and that would be all that would be needed. But bless me, Oona, how are we to use our influence unless we can see him?—and I cannot see how we are to get at him."

"Oh, mem!" cried Mysie, impeding Hamish's oars as she stretched over his shoulder, "just one of Miss Oona's little notties!"

But this was a step that required much reflection, and at which the anxious mother shook her head.

CHAPTER XV.

It had rained all night, and the morning was wet and cold; the water dull like lead, the sky a mass of clouds; all the bare branches of the trees dropping limp in the humid air. Mrs. Forrester, on further thought, had not permitted Oona to write even the smallest of her "bit notties" to Lord Erradeen; for, though she lived on an isle in Loch Houran, this lady flattered herself that she knew the world. She indited a little epistle of her own, in which she begged him to come and see her upon what she might call a matter of business—a thing that concerned his own affairs. This was carried by Hamish, but it received no reply. Lord Erradeen was out. Where could he be out on a Sabbath day at night, in a place where there were no dinner parties, nor any club, nor the temptations of a town, but just a lonely country place? Nor was there any answer in the morning, which was more wonderful still. It was ill-bred, Mrs. Forrester thought, and she was more than ever glad that her daughter had not been involved in the matter. But Hamish had information which was not communicated to the drawing-room, and over which

Mysie and he laid their heads together in the kitchen. The poor young gentleman was off his head altogether, the servants said. The door was just left open, and he came in, nobody knew when. He could not bear that anybody should say a word to him. There had been thoughts among them of sending for his mother, and old Symington showed to Hamish a telegram prepared for Mr. Milnathort, acquainting him with the state of affairs, which he had not yet ventured to send —"For he will come to himself soon or syne," the old man said; "it's just the weird of the Me'vens that is upon him." Symington was indifferent to the fate of the poor crofters. He said "the factor will ken what to do." He was not a Loch Houran man.

On the Monday, however, the feeling of all the little population on the isle ran very high. The wet morning, the leaden loch, the low-lying clouds oppressed the mental atmosphere, and the thought of the poor people turned out of their houses in the rain, increased the misery of the situation in a way scarcely to be expected in the west, where it is supposed to rain for ever. At eleven o'clock Oona appeared in her thickest ulster and her strongest boots.

"I am going up to see old Jenny," she said, with a little air of determination.

"My dear, you will be just wet through; and are you sure your boots are thick enough? You will come back to me with a heavy cold, and then what shall we all do? But take some tea and sugar in your basket,

Oona," said her mother. She went with the girl to the door in spite of these half-objections, which did not mean anything. "And a bottle of my ginger cordial might not be amiss—they all like it, poor bodies! And, Oona, see, my dear, here are two pound notes. It's all I have of change, and it's more than I can afford; but if it comes to the worst—— But surely, surely John Shaw, that is a very decent man, and comes of a good family, will have found the means to do something!"

The kind lady stood at the door indifferent to the wet which every breath of air shook from the glistening branches. It had ceased to rain, and in the west there was a pale clearness, which made the leaden loch more chilly still, yet was a sign of amelioration. Mrs. Forrester wrung her hands, and cast one look at the glistening woods of Auchnasheen, and another at the dark mass, on the edge of the water, of Kinloch Houran. She did not know whether to be angry with Lord Erradeen for being so ill-bred, or to compassionate him for the eclipse which he had sustained. But, after all, he was a very secondary object in her mind in comparison with Oona, whose course she watched in the boat, drawing a long line across the leaden surface of the water. She was just like the dove out of the ark, Mrs. Forrester thought.

The little hamlet of Truach-Glas was at some distance from the loch. Oona walked briskly along the coach road for two miles or thereabouts, then turned up

to the left on a road which narrowed as it ascended till it became little more than a cart track, with a footway at the side. In the broader valley below a substantial farmhouse, with a few outlying cottages, was the only point of habitation, and on either side of the road a few cultivated fields, chiefly of turnips and potatoes, were all that broke the stretches of pasture, extending to the left as high as grass would grow, up the dark slopes of the hills. But the smaller glen on the right had a more varied and lively appearance, and was broken into small fields bearing signs of cultivation tolerably high up, some of them still yellow with the stubble of the late harvest, the poor little crop of oats or barley which never hoped to ripen before October, if then. A mountain stream, which was scarcely a thread of water in the summer, now leaped fiercely enough, turbid and swollen, from rock to rock in its rapid descent. The houses clustered on a little tableland at some height above the road, where a few gnarled hawthorns, rowans, and birches were growing. They were poor enough to have disgusted any social reformer, or political economist; grey growths of rough stones, which might have come together by chance, so little shape was there in the bulging walls. Only a few of them had even the rough chimney at one end wattled with ropes of straw, which showed an advanced civilisation. The others had nothing but the hole in the roof, which is the first and homeliest expedient of primitive ventilation. It might have been reasonably asked what charm these hovels

could have to any one to make them worth struggling for. But reason is not lord of all.

There was no appearance of excitement about the place when Oona, walking quickly, and a little out of breath, reached the foremost houses. The men and boys were out about their work, up the hill, or down the water, in the occupations of the day; and indeed there were but few men, at any time, about the place. Three out of the half-dozen houses were tenanted by "widow women," one with boys who cultivated her little holding, one who kept going with the assistance of a hired lad, while the third lived upon her cow, which the neighbours helped her to take care of. The chief house of the community, and the only one which bore something of a comfortable aspect, was that of Duncan Fraser, who had the largest allotment of land, and who, though he had fallen back so far with his rent as to put himself in the power of the law, was one of the class which as peasant proprietors are thought to be the strength of France. If the land had been his own he would have found existence very possible under the hard and stern conditions which were natural to him, and probably would have brought up for the Church, Robbie his eldest boy, who had got all the parish school could give him, and was still dreaming, as he cut the peats or hoed the potatoes, of Glasgow College and the world. Of the other two houses, one was occupied by an old pair whose children were out in the world, and who managed, by the contributions of distant sons and daughters, to pay

their rent. The last was in the possession of a "weirdless" wight, who loved whisky better than home or holding, and whose wife and children toiled through as best they could the labour of their few fields.

There were about twenty children in the six houses, all ruddy, weatherbeaten, flaxen-haired, the girls tied up about their shoulders in little tartan shawls, and very bare about their legs; the boys in every kind of quaint garments, little bags of trousers, cobbled out of bigger garments by workwomen more frugal than artistic. The rent had failed, for how was money to be had on these levels? but the porridge had never altogether failed. A few little ones were playing "about the doors" in a happy superiority to all prejudices on the subject of mud and puddles. One woman was washing her clothes at her open door. Old Jenny, whom Oona had come to see, was out upon her doorstep, gazing down the glen to watch the footsteps of her precious "coo," which a lass of ten with streaming hair was leading out to get a mouthful of wet grass. Jenny's mind was always in a flutter lest something should happen to the cow.

"Ye would pass her by upon the road, Miss Oona," the old woman said, "and how would ye think she was looking? To get meat to her, it's just a' my thought; but I canna think she will be none the worse for a bit mouthfu' on the hill."

"But, Jenny, have you nothing to think of but the cow? It will not be true then, that the time of grace

is over, and that the sheriff's officers are coming to turn you all out?"

"The sheriff's officers!" cried Jenny. She took the edge of her apron in her hand and drew the hem slowly through her fingers, which was a sign of perplexity: but yet she was quite composed. "Na, na, Miss Oona, they'll never turn us out. What wad I be thinking about but the coo? She's my breadwinner and a' my family. Hoots no, they'll never turn us out."

"But Mr. Shaw was in great trouble yesterday. He said this was the last day——"

"I never fash'd my thoom about it," said Jenny. "The last day! It's maybe the last, or the first, I would never be taking no notice. For the factor, he's our great friend, and he would not be letting them do it. No, no; it would but be his jokes," the old woman said.

Was it his jokes? This was the second time the idea had been presented to her; but Oona remembered the factor's serious face.

"You all seem very quiet here," she said; "not as if any trouble was coming. But has there not been trouble, Jenny, about your rent or something?"

"Muckle trouble," said Jenny; "they were to have taken the coo. What would have become of me if they had ta'en the coo? Duncan, they have ta'en his, puir lad. To see it go down the brae was enough to break your heart. But John Shaw he's a kind man; he would not be letting them meddle with us. He just said

'It's a lone woman; my lord can do without it better than the old wife can do without it,' he said. He's a kind man, and so my bonnie beast was saved. I was wae for Duncan; but still, Miss Oona, things is no desperate so lang as you keep safe your ain coo."

"That is true," said Oona with a little laugh. There must, she thought, be some mistake, or else Mr. Shaw had found Lord Erradeen, and without the help of any influence had moved him to pity the cotters. Under this consolation she got out her tea and sugar, and other trifles which had been put into the basket. It was a basket that was well known in the neighbourhood, and had conveyed many a little dainty in time of need. Jenny was grateful for the little packets of tea and sugar which she took more or less as a right, but looked with a curious eye at the "ginger cordial" for which Mrs. Forrester was famous. It was not a wicked thing like whisky, no, no: but it warmed ye on a cold day. Jenny would not have objected to a drop. While she eyed it there became audible far off voices down the glen, and sounds as of several people approaching, sounds very unusual in this remote corner of the world. Jenny forgot the ginger cordial and Oona ran to the door to see what it was, and the woman who had been washing paused in her work, and old Nancy Robertson, she whose rent was paid, and who had no need to fear any sheriff's officers, came out to her door. Even the children stopped in their game.

The voices were still far off, down upon the road, upon

which there was a group of men, scarcely distinguishable at this distance. Simon Fraser's wife, she who had been washing, called out that it was Duncan talking to the factor; but who were those other men? A sense of approaching trouble came upon the women. Nelly Fraser wiped the soapsuds from her arms, and wrung her hands still fresh from her tub. She was always prepared for evil, as is natural to a woman with a 'weirdless" husband. Old Jenny, for her part, thought at once of the coo. She flew, as well as her old legs would carry her, to the nearest knoll, and shrieked to the fair-haired little lass who was slowly following that cherished animal to bring Brockie back. "Bring her back, ye silly thing. Will ye no be seeing—but I mauna say that," she added in an undertone. "Bring back the coo! Bring her back! Jessie, my lamb, bring back the coo." What with old Jenny shrieking, and the voices in the distance, and something magnetic and charged with disorder in the air, people began to appear from all the houses. One of the widow's sons, a red and hairy lad, came running in, in his heavy boots, from the field where he was working. Duncan Fraser's daughter set down a basket of peat which she was carrying in, and called her mother to the door. "There's my father with the factor and twa-three strange men," said the girl, "and oh, what will they be wanting here?" Thus the women and children looked on with growing terror, helpless before the approach of fate, as they might have done two centuries before, when the

invaders were rapine and murder, instead of calm authority and law.

When Oona made her appearance half an hour before everything had been unquestioning tranquillity and peace. Now, without a word said, all was alarm. The poor people did not know what was going to happen, but they felt that something was going to happen. They had been living on a volcano, easily, quietly, without thinking much of it. But now the fire was about to blaze forth. Through the minds of those that were mothers there ran a calculation as swift as light. "What will we do with the bairns? what will we do with Granny? and the bits of plenishing?" they said to each other. The younger ones were half pleased with the excitement, not knowing what it was. Meantime Duncan and Mr. Shaw came together up the road, the poor man arguing with great animation and earnestness, the factor listening with a troubled countenance and sometimes shaking his head. Behind them followed the servants of the law, those uncomfortable officials to whom the odium of their occupation clings, though it is no fault of theirs.

"No, Mr. Shaw, we canna pay. You know that as well as I do; but oh, sir, give us a little time. Would you turn the weans out on the hill and the auld folk? What would I care if it was just to me? But think upon the wake creatures — my auld mother that is eighty, and the bairns. If my lord will not let us off there's some of the other gentry that are kind and will

lend us a helping hand. Oh, give us time! My lord that is young and so well off, he canna surely understand. What is it to him? and to us it's life and death."

"Duncan, my man," said the factor, "you are just breaking my heart. I know all that as well as you; but what can I do? It is the last day, and we have to act or we just make fools of ourselves. My lord might have stopped it, but he has not seen fit. For God's sake say no more for I cannot do it. Ye just break my heart!"

By this time the women were within hearing, and stood listening with wistful faces, turning from one to another. When he paused they struck in together, moving towards him eagerly.

"Oh, Mr. Shaw, you've always been our friend," cried Duncan's wife; "you canna mean that you've come to turn us out to the hill, with all the little ones and granny?"

"Oh, sir!" cried the other, "have pity upon me that has nae prop nor help but just a weirdless man."

"Me, I have nae man ava, but just thae hands to travail for my bairns," said a third.

And then there came a shriller tone of indignation. "The young lord, he'll just get a curse—he'll get no blessing."

The factor made a deprecating gesture with his hands "I can do nothing, I can do nothing," he said. "Take your bairns down the glen to my housekeeper Marg'ret;

take them down to the town, the rest of ye—they shall not want. Whatever I can do, I'll do. But for God's sake do not stop us with your wailin', for it has to be done; it is no fault of mine."

This appeal touched one of the sufferers at least with a movement of fierce irony. Duncan uttered a short, sharp laugh, which rung strangely into the air, so full of passion. "Haud your tongues, women," he cried, "and no vex Mr. Shaw; you're hurting his feelings," with a tone impossible to describe, in which wrath and misery and keen indignation and ridicule contended for the mastery. He was the only man in the desolate group. He drew a few steps apart and folded his arms upon his breast, retiring in that pride of despair which a cotter ruined may experience no less than a king vanquished, from further struggle or complaint. The women neither understood nor noted the finer meaning in his words. They had but one thought, the misery before them. They crowded round the factor, all speaking in one breath, grasping his arm to call his attention—almost mobbing him with distracted appeals, with the wild natural eloquence of their waving hands and straining eyes.

Meanwhile there were other elements, some comic enough, in the curious circle round. Old Nancy Robertson had not left the doorstep where she stood keenly watching in the composure and superiority of one whom nobody could touch, who had paid her rent, and was above the world. It was scarcely possible not

to be a little complacent in the superiority of her circumstances, or to refrain from criticising the unseemly excitement of the others. She had her spectacles on her nose, and her head projected, and she thought they were all like play-actors with their gesticulations and cries. "I wouldna be skreighin' like that—no me," she said. Round about the fringe of children gaped and gazed, some stolid with amaze, some pale in a vague sympathetic misery, none of them quite without a certain enjoyment of this extraordinary episode and stimulation of excitement. And old Jenny, awakened to no alarm about her cottage, still stood upon her knoll, with her whole soul intent upon the fortunes of Brockie, who had met the sheriff's officers in full career. The attempts of her little guardian to turn the cow back from her whiff of pasture had only succeeded in calling the special attention of these invaders. They stopped short, and one of them taking a piece of rope from his pocket secured it round the neck of the frightened animal, who stood something like a woman in a similar case, looking to left and to right, not knowing in her confusion which way to bolt, though the intention was evident in her terrified eyes. At this Jenny gave a shriek of mingled rage and terror, which in its superior force and concentrated passion rang through all the other sounds, silencing for the moment even the wailing of the women—and flung herself into the midst of the struggle. She was a dry, little, withered old woman, nimble and light, and ran like a hare or

rabbit down the rough road without a pause or stumble.

"My coo!" cried Jenny, "ye sallna tak' her; ye sall tak' my heart's blood first. My coo! Miss Oona, Miss Oona, will you just be standing by, like nothing at all, and letting them tak' my coo? G'way, ye robbers," Jenny shrieked, flinging one arm about the neck of the alarmed brute, while she pushed away its captor with the other. Her arm was still vigorous, though she was old. The man stumbled and lost his hold of the rope; the cow, liberated, tossed head and tail into the air and flung off to the hill-side like a deer. The shock threw Jenny down and stunned her. This made a little diversion in the dismal scene above.

And now it became evident that whatever was to be done must be done, expression being exhausted on the part of the victims, who stood about in a blank of overwrought feeling awaiting the next move. The factor made a sign with his hand, and sat down upon a ledge of rock opposite the cottages, his shaggy eyebrows curved over his eyes, his hat drawn down upon his brows. A sort of silent shock ran through the beholders when the men entered the first cottage: and when they came out again carrying a piece of furniture, there was a cry, half savage in its wild impotence. Unfortunately the first thing that came to their hands was a large wooden cradle, in which lay a baby tucked up under the big patchwork quilt, which bulged out on every side. As it was set down upon its large rockers on the

uneven ground the little sleeper gave a startled wail; and then it was that that cry, sharp and keen, dividing the silence like a knife, burst from the breasts of the watching people. It was Nelly Fraser's baby, who had the "weirdless" man. She stood with her bare arms wrapped in her apron beside her abandoned washing-tub, and gazed as if incapable of movement, with a face like ashes, at the destruction of her home. But while the mother stood stupefied, a little thing of three or four, which had been clinging to her skirts in keen baby wonder and attention, when she saw the cradle carried forth into the open air immediately took the place of guardian. Such an incident had never happened in all little Jeanie's experience before. She trotted forth, abandoning all alarm, to the road in which it was set down, and, turning a little smiling face of perfect content to the world, began to rock it softly with little coos of soothing and rills of infant laughter. The sombre background round, with all its human misery, made a dismal foil to this image of innocent satisfaction. The factor jumped up and turned his back upon the scene altogether, biting his nails and lowering his brows in a fury of wretchedness. And at last the poor women began to stir and take whispered counsel with each other. There was no longer room for either hope or entreaty; the only thing to be thought of now was what to do.

The next cottage was that of Nancy Robertson, who still held her position on her doorstep, watching the

proceedings with a keen but somewhat complacent curiosity. They gave her an intense sense of self-importance and superiority, though she was not without feeling. When, however, the men, who had warmed to their work, and knew no distinction between one and another, approached her, a sudden panic and fury seized the old woman. She defied them shrilly, flying at the throat of the foremost with her old hands. The wretchedness of the poor women whose children were being thrust out shelterless did not reach the wild height of passion of her whose lawful property was threatened.

"Villains!" she shrieked, "will ye break into my hoose? What right have ye in my hoose? I'll brack your banes afore you put a fit into my hoose."

"Whist, whist, wife," said one of the men; "let go now, or I'll have to hurt ye. You canna stop us. You'll just do harm to yourself."

"John Shaw, John Shaw," shrieked Nancy, "do ye see what they're doing? and me that has paid my rent, no like those weirdless fuils. Do ye hear me speak? I've paid my rent to the last farden. I've discharged a' my debts, as I wuss ithers would discharge their debts to me." Her voice calmed down as the factor turned and made an impatient sign to the men. "Ye see," said Nancy, making a little address to her community, "what it is to have right on your side. They canna meddle with me. My man's auld, and I have everything to do for mysel', but they canna lay a hand on me.

"Oh, hold your tongue, woman," cried Duncan Fraser. "If ye canna help us, ye can let us be."

"And wha says that I canna help ye? I am just saying—I pay my debts as I wuss that ithers should pay their debts to me: and that's Scripter," said Nancy; but she added, "I never said I would shut my door to a neebor: ye can bring in Granny here; I'm no just a heart of stane like that young lord."

The women had not waited to witness Nancy's difficulties. Most of them had gone into their houses, to take a shawl from a cupboard, a book from the "drawers-head." One or two appeared with the family Bible under their arm. "The Lord kens where we are to go, but we must go somewhere," they said. There was a little group about Oona and her two pound notes. The moment of excitement was over, and they had now nothing to do but to meet their fate. The factor paced back and forward on the path, going out of his way to avoid here and there a pile of poor furniture. And the work of devastation went on rapidly: it is so easy, alas, to dismantle a cottage with its but and ben. Duncan Fraser did not move till two or three had been emptied. When he went in to bring out his mother, there was a renewed sensation among the worn-out people who were scarcely capable of any further excitement. Granny was Granny to all the glen. She was the only survivor of her generation. They had all known her from their earliest days. They stood worn and sorrow-stricken, huddled together in a little crowd, waiting before

they took any further steps, till Granny should come.

But it was not Granny who came first. Some one, a stranger even to the children, whose attention was so easily attracted by any novelty, appeared suddenly round a corner of the hill. He paused at the unexpected sight of the little cluster of habitations; for the country was unknown to him; and for a moment appeared as if he would have turned back. But the human excitement about this scene caught him in spite of himself. He gazed at it for a moment trying to divine what was happening, then came on slowly with hesitating steps. He had been out all the morning, as he had been for some days before. His being had sustained a great moral shock, and for the moment all his holds on life seemed gone. This was the first thing that had moved him even to the faintest curiosity. He came forward slowly, observed by no one. The factor was still standing with his back to the woeful scene, gloomily contemplating the distant country, while Oona moved about in the midst of the women, joining in their consultations, and doing her best to rouse poor Nelly, who sat by her baby's cradle like a creature dazed and capable of no further thought. There was, therefore, no one to recognise Lord Erradeen as he came slowly into the midst of this tragedy, not knowing what it was. The officials had recovered their spirits as they got on with their work. Natural pity and sympathetic feeling had yielded to the carelessness

of habit and common occupation. They had begun to make rough jokes with each other, to fling the cotters' possessions carelessly out of the windows, to give each other catches with a "Hi! tak' this," flinging the things about. Lord Erradeen had crossed the little bridge, and was in the midst of the action of the painful drama, when they brought out from Duncan's house his old mother's chair. It was cushioned with pillows, one of which tumbled out into the mud and was roughly caught up by the rough fellow who carried it, and flung at his companion's head, with a laugh and jest. It was he who first caught sight of the stranger, a new figure among the disconsolate crowd. He gave a whistle to his comrade to announce a novelty, and rattled down hastily out of his hands the heavy chair. Walter was wholly roused by the strangeness of this pantomime. It brought back something to his mind, though he could scarcely tell what. He stepped in front of the man and asked, "What does this mean?" in a hasty and somewhat imperious tone; but his eyes answered his question almost before he had asked it. Nelly Fraser with her pile of furniture, her helpless group of children, her stupefied air of misery, was full in the foreground, and the ground was strewed with other piles. Half of the houses in the hamlet were already gutted. One poor woman was lifting her bedding out of the wet, putting it up upon chairs; another stood regarding hers helplessly, as if without energy to attempt even so small a salvage.

"What is the meaning of all this?" the young man cried imperiously again.

His voice woke something in the deep air of despondency and misery which had not been there before. It caught the ear of Oona, who pushed the women aside in sudden excitement. It roused—was it a faint thrill of hope in the general despair? Last of all it reached the factor, who, standing gloomily apart, had closed himself up in angry wretchedness against any appeal. He did not hear this, but somehow felt it in the air, and turned round, not knowing what the new thing was. When he saw Lord Erradeen, Shaw was seized as with a sudden frenzy. He turned round upon him sharply, with an air which was almost threatening.

"What does it mean?" he said. "It means your will and pleasure, Lord Erradeen, not mine. God is my witness, no will of mine. You brute!" cried the factor, suddenly, "what are you doing? Stand out of the way, and let the honest woman pass. Get out of her way, I tell you, or I'll send ye head foremost down the glen!"

This sudden outcry, which was a relief to the factor's feelings, was addressed not to Walter, but to the man who, coming out again with a new armful, came rudely in the way of the old Granny, to whom all the glen looked up, and who was coming out with a look of bewilderment on her aged face, holding by her son's arm. Granny comprehended vaguely, if at all, what was going on. She gave a momentary glance of

suspicion at the fellow who pushed against her, then looked out with a faint smile at the two gentlemen standing in front of the door. Her startled mind recurred to its old instincts with but a faint perception of anything new.

"Sirs," she said, in her feeble old voice, "I am distressed I canna ask ye in; but I'm feckless mysel, being a great age, and there's some flitting going on, and my good-daughter she is out of the way."

"Do you hear that, my lord?" cried Shaw; "the old wife is making her excuses for not asking you into a house you are turning her out of at the age of eighty-three. Oh, I am not minding if I give ye offence! I have had enough of it. Find another factor, Lord Erradeen. I would rather gather stones upon the fields than do again what I have done this day."

Walter looked about like a man awakened from a dream. He said, almost with awe—

"Is this supposed to be done by me? I know nothing of it, nor the reason. What is the reason? I disown it altogether as any act of mine."

"Oh, my lord," cried Shaw, who was in a state of wild excitement, "there is the best of reasons. Rent—your lordship understands that—a little more money lest your coffers should not be full enough. And as for these poor bodies, they have so much to put up with, a little more does not matter. They have not a roof to their heads, but that's nothing to your lordship. You can cover the hills with sheep, and they can—die—if

they like," cried the factor, avenging himself for all he had suffered. He turned away with a gesture of despair and fury. "I have done enough; I wash my hands of it," he cried.

Walter cast around him a bewildered look. To his own consciousness he was a miserable and helpless man; but all the poor people about gazed at him, wistful, deprecating, as at a sort of unknown, unfriendly god, who had their lives in his hands. The officers perhaps thought it a good moment to show their zeal in the eyes of the young lord. They made a plunge into the house once more, and appeared again, one carrying Duncan's bed, a great, slippery, unwieldy sack of chaff, another charged with the old, tall, eight-day clock, which he jerked along as if it had been a man hopping from one foot to another.

"We'll soon be done, my lord," the first said in an encouraging tone, "and then a' the commotion will just die away."

Lord Erradeen had been lost in a miserable dream. He woke up now at this keen touch of reality, and found himself in a position so abhorrent and antagonistic to all his former instincts and traditions, that his very being seemed to stand still in the horror of the moment. Then a sudden passionate energy filled all his veins. The voice in which he ordered the men back rang through the glen. He had flung himself upon one of them in half-frantic rage, before he was aware what he was doing, knocking down the astounded

official, who got up rubbing his elbow, and declaring it was no fault of his; while Walter glared at him, not knowing what he did. But after this encounter with flesh and blood Lord Erradeen recovered his reason. He turned round quickly, and with his own hands carried back Granny's chair. The very weight of it, the touch of something to do, brought life into his veins. He took the old woman from her son's arm, and led her in reverently, supporting her upon his own: then going out again without a word, addressed himself to the manual work of restoration. From the moment of his first movement, the whole scene changed in the twinkling of an eye. The despairing apathy of the people gave way to a tumult of haste and activity. Duncan Fraser was the first to move.

"My lord!" he cried; "if you are my lord," his stern composure yielding to tremulous excitement, "if it's your good will and pleasure to let us bide, that's all we want. Take no trouble for us; take no thought for that." Walter gave him a look, almost without intelligence. He had not a word to say. He was not sufficiently master of himself to express the sorrow and anger and humiliation in his awakened soul; but he could carry back the poor people's things, which was a language of nature not to be misunderstood. He went on taking no heed of the eager assistance offered on all sides. "I'll do it, my lord. Oh, dinna you trouble. It's ower much kindness. Ye'll fyle your fingers; ye'll wear out your strength. We'll do it; we'll do it," the people cried.

The cottagers' doors flew open as by magic; they worked all together, the women, the children, and Duncan Fraser, and Lord Erradeen. Even Oona joined, carrying the little children back to their homes, picking up here a bird in a cage, there a little stunted geranium or musk in a pot. In half an hour it seemed, or less, the whole was done, and when the clouds that had been lowering on the hills and darkening the atmosphere broke and began to pour down torrents of rain upon the glen, the little community was housed and comfortable once more.

While this excitement lasted Walter was once more the healthful and vigorous young man who had travelled with Oona on the coach, and laughed with her on the Isle. But when the storm was over, and they walked together towards the loch, she became aware of the difference in him. He was very serious, pale, almost haggard now that the excitement was over. His smiling lips smiled no longer, there was in his eyes, once so light-hearted and careless, a sort of hunted, anxious look.

"No," he said, in answer to her questions, "I have not been ill; I have had—family matters to occupy me: and of this I knew nothing. Letters? I had none, I received nothing. I have been occupied, too much perhaps, with—family affairs."

Upon this no comment could be made, but his changed looks made so great a claim upon her sympathy that Oona looked at him with eyes that were

almost tender in their pity. He turned round suddenly and met her glance.

"You know," he said, with a slight tremble in his voice, "that there are some things—they say in every family—a little hard to bear. But I have been too much absorbed—I was taken by surprise. It shall happen no more." He held his head high, and looked round him as if to let some one else see the assurance he was giving her. "I promise you," he added, in a tone that rang like a defiance, "it shall happen no more!" Then he added hurriedly with a slight swerve aside, and trembling in his voice, "Do you think I might come with you? Would Mrs. Forrester have me at the Isle?"

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